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**Is there an Online Public Sphere?
A Critical Analysis of
Three British Mainstream News
Online Comment Forums**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of
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Declaration

This thesis is being submitted to the University of Warwick in partial fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at any other university.

Abstract

This study focuses on reader comments within three British mainstream news online comment forums, the *BBC's World Have your Say*, *The Daily Mail's RightMinds* and *The Guardian's Comment is Free*, to assess whether, and to what extent, these virtual spaces can be viewed as hosting an online public sphere. The sample includes 9,424 comments drawn from 78 forums between 1st May 2011 and 31st May 2012. Two theoretical frameworks are applied during data analysis comprising an initial small-scale content analysis complemented by a larger sociological discourse analysis. First, data are analysed against three of Dahlberg's (2001a) online public sphere criteria: 'autonomy', 'discursive inclusion and equality' and 'exchange and critique'. Second, analytical tools drawn from Bakhtinian (1986) notions of utterance, speech genres and heteroglossia are applied to the data. Key themes arising include the different levels of autonomy commenters achieve across the three news comment forums, abuse as a catalyst for participating in debates, and the importance of commenter-to-commenter deliberations. Moreover, in contrast to the rational-critical demands of public sphere discourse, intonation and more specifically Bakhtin's (1984) notion of emotional-volitional content, demonstrates a significant presence within debates.

Introduction

The idea that the public should have a forum through which to voice their concerns is a significant foundation of democratic discourse, as Page (1996:1) notes “[p]ublic deliberation is essential to democracy.” This practice of public deliberation by citizens has a long history that stretches back to ancient Greece and forward to Internet forums and chatrooms (Delli Carpini et al, 2004). Habermas (1989) based his theoretical conception of the ‘public sphere’ on the bringing together of two separate and distinct spheres in bourgeois society, that of the private sphere and the state. Habermas (1989) argued that this ‘public sphere’ was a place in which private citizens could come together and debate the issues of the day as a public (Habermas, 1989).

Whilst Habermas’ (1989) original public sphere conception is considered as “indispensable to critical social theory and democratic political practice” (Fraser, 1990:57), it has also been heavily criticised for being idealised (Lyotard, 1984; Schudson, 1997), exclusionary (Eley, 1992; Ryan, 1992) and anti-pluralistic (Fraser, 1990; Mouffe, 2000). More recently, the advent of new technologies has led Neil Poster (1997) to argue that “the age of the public sphere as face-to-face talk is clearly over: the question of democracy must henceforth take into account new forms of electronically-mediated discourse”.

Consequently, Habermas’ (1989) ‘public sphere’ conception has been reconfigured by a number of scholars interested in applying this critical social theory to online debates (Dahlberg, 2001c; Poor, 2005; Zhou et al, 2008; Noci et al, 2010, Ruiz et al, 2011). Lincoln Dahlberg (2001a) sets out six normative online public sphere criteria drawn from Habermas’ (1989) public sphere conception, and applies them to an Internet-based initiative Minnesota E-Democracy. These six criteria are:

1. Autonomy
2. Exchange and Critique

3. Reflexivity
4. Ideal Role-taking
5. Sincerity
6. Discursive Inclusion and Equality

This online initiative served as a project through which people in Minnesota could come together and discuss issues that specifically affected them through rational-critical dialogue, which Dahlberg (2001c) argues they largely achieved. More recently, Robertson et al (2010) tested Dahlberg's (2001a) six online public sphere criteria against political discourses found on *Facebook* during the 2008 US presidential election. Their findings indicate that elements of three of Dahlberg's (2001a) criteria, 'ideal role-taking', 'exchange and critique' and 'discursive inclusion and equality' were in evidence within the debates.

Poor's (2005) study focused on the website *Slashdot* which describes itself as 'News for Nerds' in which he sets out four criteria that are necessary for such a site to be considered as an online public sphere:

1. Public spheres are spaces of discourse, often mediated.
2. Public spheres often allow for new, previously excluded, discussants.
3. Issues discussed are often political in nature.
4. Ideas are judged by their merit, not by the standing of the speaker.

Slashdot.com encourages groups of individuals to participate in new political and technical discussions whose comments are moderated for quality. Consequently, Poor (2005) argues all four of his online public sphere criteria are substantiated within *Slashdot.com*.

Poor's (2005) online public sphere criteria has also been applied in a study focusing on the *Al Arabiya* website. Al-Saggaf's (2006) study focused on news articles and reader comments, and concluded that whilst 'rational-critical debates' were limited, the site could still be deemed to satisfy Poor's (2005) online public sphere criteria. Further research has also begun to focus on news websites' online reader comments as a site for exploring a new found space for 'public deliberations' (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009).

Reader Comments

Within contemporary online digital media, a variety of website features enable commenters to participate in online commentary and debates, and is the most common form of engagement within online newspapers (Domingo et al, 2008; Emmer et al, 2011). Reader comments are of interest to questions concerning participation in a deliberative digital democracy and its relationship with the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2011). Online mass media such as news websites allow contributors to communicate collectively on important issues, to a large audience, resulting in the formation of public opinion (Gerhards & Schafer, 2010). According to Ruiz et al (2011:464) reader comments can be considered the most popular form of audience participation.

However, decisions about the selection of comments, evaluations and views for publication remains the domain of ‘professional communicators’ (Weber, 2014:942). This issue is somewhat overcome by online newspapers providing the opportunity for commentary and debate, in which ordinary users can actively communicate their views in an easy and accessible way, increasing the opportunity for discursive processing of news by contributors (Weber, 2014). The most common form of commentary occurs when contributors can post comments in a comment-field directly attached to an article (Strandberg & Berg, 2013). It is argued that immediate publishing, large amounts of space and minimal censorship offer commenters the opportunity to participate in a way that posting letters to the editor could not achieve due to limited space in newspapers (Strandberg & Berg, 2013).

To date, the majority of research on reader comments has focused on participatory journalism in which reader comments are just one of several modes of participation. This research focuses on assessments of whether, and to what extent user participation effects the reporting behaviour of journalists, the implementation of participation features on news websites, how user-generated-content is managed and the reasons for adopting different

management strategies (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011b; Nielsen, 2012; Reich, 2011 specifically reader comments). Researchers have also examined the content of reader comments (e.g. Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011a; Douai & Noful 2012; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012) how users' perceptions and judgements are influenced by them (e.g. Lee & Jang, 2010) and information about readers and writers of comments (Bergstrom, 2008; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011b; Emmer et al, 2011).

However, scholarly discussions on whether newspapers' readers' comments can fulfil the democratic potential for citizen discussions are divided. Some argue that readers' comments will exert a positive change on political communication (see, Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Schuth et al, 2007) whilst others espouse a negative effect due to low democratic quality and lack of deliberation (Kohn & Nieger, 2007). Further research by Bergstrom (2008) revealed that the public show little interest in submitting comments. Conversely, Weber (2014:952) argues that there is potential for quality public discourse in online newspapers though "this potential only emerges when a number of users participate in commenting and when users repeatedly post comments to the point at which communication in the article's comments section becomes interactive".

Research suggests that readers' comments on editorials, reflect both editorial content and other comments, and may become democratic tools for citizens (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009). However, others report a high degree of comments that demonstrate a lack of respect, diverse perspectives and mature arguments in reader comments (Noci et al, 2010). This dichotomy between positive and negative outcomes of reader comments is characterised by Friedman's (2011:13) study concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in two online newspapers, in which commenting is described as "critical-rational debate, extremist demagoguery, friendly teasing, exhibitionism, and emotional pleas".

With regard to the democratic potential of online newspaper readers' comments, and the potential for online public spheres, there remains a great many theoretical uncertainties and inconclusive results from empirical investigations. A study carried out by Zhou et al (2008) took the concept of the public sphere to analyse debates in the forums of the Chinese news site *Doyoo.com*. Their analysis was guided by four criteria drawn from Habermas' (1989) public sphere theory:

1. Quantity of posts and participants
2. Diversity of content in dialogue
3. Critical-rational deliberation
4. Interactivity and reciprocity

The analysis showed that rationality, justification for arguments and civility were in evidence, however, they also found that only a limited number of contributors participated in the forums, that whilst there was some diversity of viewpoints there was a lack of deliberation and found low levels of complexity within arguments.

Noci et al's (2010) study focused on the comment forums of seven online Catalan Newspapers. Their analysis was based on a set of standards drawn from Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action. They argue that to identify an effective debate in the study of comments in news, a standard against which to compare the dynamics of those discussions should be set, they outline these standards as follows: first, participants should strive for coherent argumentation:

1. Participants should not contradict themselves.
2. An argument applied to a subject should be also applied to other similar subjects.
3. Different participants should not use the same expression to define different things.

Second, participants should foster a collective search for truth, with the mutual recognition of participants as rational citizens:

1. Participants should only say what they believe.
2. If new ideas are proposed, their relationship with the issue at hand must be explained.

Third, participants should promote an agreement based on the best argument:

1. Every person can participate in the debate.
2. Every statement can be questioned.
3. Every person can express their opinions, needs or wishes

Noci et al's (2010:62) results show that comments do not foster democratic dialogue and "hardly meet any of the Habermasian principles". They suggest that the majority of commenters post single comments, that though comments are not abusive they lack respect for others, comments lack diversity, lack maturity, are not fruitful contributions and do not consist of 'rational-critical' deliberations (2010:62).

In a later study Ruiz et al (2011) analysed reader comments on five national newspapers' websites, *The Guardian* (United Kingdom), *Le Monde* (France), *The New York Times* (United States), *El País* (Spain), and *La Repubblica* (Italy). The study examined the extent to which these digital discussions fit Habermas' principles for democratic debate using his 'discursive ethics' and demanding a 'normative' benchmark (2011:1). Their criteria were set out as follows:

1. Logic and coherence
2. Cooperative search for truth
3. An agreement based on the best argument

Their results are mainly characterised by the diversity of points of view, the amount of argumentation and the volume of actual dialogue between the participants. These findings were significantly higher in debates in *NYTimes.com* and *Guardian.co.uk*, than in the other three newspapers. Whilst the majority of users adhered to the ideological principles of the news-room, only *NYTimes.com* and *Guardian.co.uk* contained the presence, and tolerance of, an alternative 'minority' perspective that encourages debate. Whilst these results point to the potential for democratic deliberativeness in online news forums, Ruiz et al. (2011:2) argue that despite the increase in public arenas for citizen debate, scholars have paid little attention to these 'conversations' and their implications for 'democracy'. Indeed, as Weber (2014:955)

suggests in the conclusion of his study on factors influencing participation and interactivity within online reader comments:

Future research should...take into consideration [that] Users not only react to the journalistic content with their comments, but they also react to the comments of other users. As a result, discussion structures emerge in an online newspaper's comment space. Future research should try to identify distinct patterns and typical dynamics in users' news discourse as well as the factors that affect it.

Therefore, prior research points to a number of factors that require further investigation concerning the online public sphere and online news comment forums.

Dahlberg's Online Public Sphere Criteria

Whilst some empirical research has drawn on Habermas' public sphere conception and deliberative democracy, scholarly research on newly-devised criteria specifically designed for an online public sphere are less forthcoming. Dahlberg's (2001) six online public sphere criteria have been accepted by scholars as applicable to online debates (Janssen & Kies, 2005; Papacharissi, 2008; Robertson et al, 2010). Whilst Robertson et al's (2010) study applied all six of Dahlberg's (2001a) online public sphere criteria to *Facebook* comments, this study focuses on three criteria 'autonomy', 'discursive inclusion and equality' and 'exchange and critique' to assess whether, or to what extent, online news comment forums can be viewed as hosting an online public sphere.

Autonomy of news media has been the subject of much scholarly research (Couldry, 2010; Curran, 2011; Anagnostou et al 2010; Psychogiouloulou, 2014) yet research regarding the autonomy of commenters' contributions within online debates does not appear to be forthcoming. Various political scientists and policy researchers argue that a 'strong' democracy is built upon direct, participatory, and deliberative engagement of ordinary citizens (Price, 2009). They also agree that political autonomy grows out of collective engagement in political discussion, yet they offer no means to assess the 'autonomy' of participants engaged in those discussions. With regard to online debates, Papacharissi

(2004:270-1) argues that whilst political discussion on the Internet does not transform public space into a public sphere, by closely analysing political postings, researchers can better understand the Internet's democratic potential.

As such, to gauge the potential for private citizens to come together as a public, to deliberate important issues of the day free from state and commercial influence, some measure of the extent to which online contributors' comments can be deemed to be 'autonomous' is necessary in empirical research. Following Papacharissi's (2004) suggestion, a close examination of the content of online news commenters' posts should give a better understanding of whether commenters' achieve any kind of 'autonomy' through the course of their debates, whilst also offering important insights into the dynamics of discussions in online news comment forums.

Discursive inclusion and equality is an important element of online public sphere theory, particularly considering the level of criticism Habermas' (1989) public sphere conception received concerning inequality and exclusion of certain groups, such as women and the working class. Regarding inclusivity and equality and the online public sphere, many studies indicate that exclusions and inequalities regarding gender (Da Silva, 2013b; Iosub et al, 2014) ethnicity and socio-economic status negatively influence online participation (James, 2011; Hargittai, 2008) and that women tend to be recipients of the highest degree of 'abusive' comments in online debates (Megarry, 2014). Yet, this criterion is more than just a measure of demographic participation.

Dahlberg (2001a) focuses on the effects that commenters can have on the inclusiveness and equality of participation of others in online debates. This includes commenters being subjected to 'abuse', certain commenters 'monopolising' the forums and being in 'control of the agenda'. Where 'autonomy' focuses on influences from state and commercial organisations, 'discursive inclusion and equality' focuses on the influences that

commenters have on one another within the context of the forums. Participation is a key factor in online public sphere theory, as such, exploring the dynamics of influence commenters have on one another is essential to understanding how inclusive, and equal participation, may be shaped by those effects.

Assessing whether commenters achieve ‘autonomy’ in the forums and whether, and to what extent they affect the participation of others, is largely established by their involvement in debates. Exchange and critique focuses on how commenters create and sustain arguments within online debates. Rather than posting ‘dogmatic assertions’, statements given without reasons or specific types of validation, commenters should participate in presenting ‘normative’ positions supported by specific ‘criticisable validity claims’ (Dahlberg, 2001a). By analysing three of Dahlberg’s (2001a) online public sphere criteria within three British mainstream online news comment forums, I establish the communicative context of debates between commenters, and their relations to online public sphere discourse.

Rationale

This thesis arises out of an underlying fascination with the relationship between public participation in online debates within online news media websites. When I hear online news comment forums described as ‘World Have Your Say’ and ‘Comment is Free’ I immediately question the potential for the public to really ‘have their say’ and whether comment really is ‘free’. Where the relationship between audience and media, particularly regarding media power, have long been studied (see, Couldry, 2000; Couldry & Curran, 2003; Jenkins & Deuze, 2008), along with the changing nature of relations between audience and media in light of digitalisation (Bird, 2011; Napoli, 2011; Webster et al, 2012) and analysis of various sites of online debates has been forthcoming (Papacharissi 2004; Cammaerts et al, 2005; Albrecht, 2006; Kushin & Kitchener, 2009; Larsson & Moe, 2012), the importance of the deliberative potential of an online public sphere is still an emerging

area of social research (Dahlberg, 2000; Poor, 2005; Al-Saggaf, 2006; Papacharissi, 2008; Ruiz et al, 2011; Graham & Wright 2014).

It points to an amalgamation of issues concerned with a number of interdisciplinary fields including media studies, cultural studies and sociology, particularly concerning research on audience, readership and the highly mediated online environment through which many individuals contribute to a broad, and ongoing virtual public dialogue. Whilst much public sphere research has focused on Habermas' (1989) idealised public sphere conception, and scholars have put forward numerous theoretical proposals that can be applied to the online context, less empirical studies on the online public sphere have taken place (Delli Carpini, 2004). To assess the relevance of an online public sphere in contemporary media-dominated society, research must focus on not only the relationships between citizen and media but also on deliberations between citizens.

Online public sphere theory can be used as a bridge between theoretical understandings of the online public sphere and empirical investigations as to whether virtual spaces can be identified as 'public space', described by Papacharissi (2008:6) as providing "the expanse that allows the public sphere to convene, [but] it does not guarantee a healthy public sphere", and more importantly as a 'public sphere'. Whilst this study utilises conceptual tools from online public sphere theory, it also incorporates a Bakhtinian analysis of utterance, speech genres and heteroglossia. In contrast to Habermasian, and Dahlbergian suppositions that there is one overarching public sphere, the Bakhtinian analysis allows for the possibility of a plurality of public spheres which are interspersed between, and interact with, one another during the course of online dialogic exchanges.

A number of other theoretical tools are also used during the course of this research including theoretical expositions of 'flaming' (Thompson & Foulger, 1996), 'interactivity' (Miloni, 2009) and 'validity claims' (Jensen, 2003). These theoretical tools are used as a

means to examine, and expand upon Dahlberg's (2001a) online public sphere criteria in relation to online news comment forums. In doing so, this study broadens the applicability of these theoretical tools to include empirical investigation of online public sphere theory.

This study also makes a number of empirical contributions to debates concerning online public sphere theory and online news comment forums. Whilst Zhou et al (2008) and Noci et al (2010) both reported a lack of deliberations between contributors in their research, Ruiz et al (2011) argue that the potential for democratic deliberations within online news comments is a distinct possibility and highlights the lack of research by scholars in this area. As such, this study fills this gap by furthering investigations into the deliberativeness of exchanges, by analysing the potential for contributors to raise issues of importance to them, deliberating those issues within online news comment forums and a Bakhtinian analysis of how those debates reflect broader social and cultural repertoires.

Noci et al's (2010) study identified a lack of respect, maturity and fruitful contributions within the comments analysed in their study, whilst Friedman's (2011) study identified both rational-critical debates and comments containing teasing, exhibitionism and emotive language. As the online public sphere conception demands contributors participate in 'rational-critical' debates, the inclusion of emotional-volitional content is anathema to online public sphere theory. As such, this study furthers research into this area by analysing the ways in which contributors convey their views both with regard to the number and type of comments, but also using a Bakhtinian analysis of the style and intonation of the comments.

Weber (2014) argues that research into the online public sphere and online news comment forums needs to focus on the interactivity of contributors, particularly the distinct patterns that emerge in exchanges between contributors, the typical dynamics of their exchanges and the factors that affect them. This study addresses these issues by examining the ways in which contributors structure their comments, the arguments contained therein, a

Bakhtinian analysis of the use of particular standardised, generic forms of utterance, the style and intonation of comments and their effects on the dynamics of debates within the forums.

In addition, research on the online public sphere and online reader comments has often focused on content analysis (Schneider, 1997; Wilhelm, 1999; Abdul-Mageed, 2008; Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Weber, 2014) however; this results in a lack of thick description of the data. The use of single case-studies has also been widely used (O Baoill, 2000; Schultz, 2000; Tanner, 2001) and widely criticised, for focusing too much on description and too little on evaluation (Dahlberg, 2002). Consequently, this study makes a methodological contribution to online public sphere research by using a mixed methods approach (Morgan, 2014).

The present research was designed to address some of the limitations of previous studies on the online public sphere, specifically in online news comment forums such as the use of small samples, lack of comparison between media types, and single-method research designs using content analysis. In contrast, the present study has adduced evidence from 9,424 comments, drawn from 78 forums in three British mainstream news online comment forums over a thirteen month time frame. Data from a ‘quality’ newspaper, *The Guardian*, a ‘tabloid’ newspaper *The Daily Mail* and a public service broadcaster the *BBC* are included, compared and contrasted during the course of the analysis. The selection concerning which forums to analyse are limited to political articles focused on ‘social protest’ for three reasons; firstly, Habermas’ (1989) notion of the ‘public sphere’ is rooted in public debate over and against political institutions and focuses on the coming together of private individuals in a public sphere where they can form public opinion; secondly, debates concerning the online public sphere have included references to political discussion (Zheng et al, 2008); and finally, to ascertain what potential online news comment forums have for facilitating online political debates leading to an online public sphere.

To assess whether, and to what extent, these three virtual spaces can be viewed as hosting an online public sphere, a systematic small scale content analysis was chosen to identify and track patterns within the data. This analysis was complemented by a larger, detailed sociological discourse analysis to surmise what those patterns suggest about debates within the forums more broadly. The discourse analysis enabled detailed analysis of debates within the forums, evaluated not only against Dahlberg's (2001a) three online public sphere criteria but against Bakhtin's (1984, 1986) theory of utterance, speech genres and heteroglossia.

Due to the unusual blend of quantitative and qualitative methods in this study, the role of theory, epistemological and ontological orientations of the chosen research methods should be addressed. Where quantitative research is deemed to focus on deductive theory testing, from a positivistic epistemological orientation and ontologically focused on objectivism, qualitative research is deemed to focus on the inductive generation of theory, from an interpretivist viewpoint with a subjective orientation (Bryman, 2008). Whilst these two methods comprise opposing characteristics on three levels, in the context of this study the research methods were chosen based on the different order of data they would produce and how they could be combined through the process of 'triangulation' (Kelle, 2001).

Despite the epistemological and ontological contradictions concerning content and discourse analysis, these contradictions were largely overcome by approaching each phase of the analysis as separate, maintaining the epistemological and ontological premises of both methods. Therefore, the two analytical approaches are complementary, allowing the results of the content analysis to be easily integrated into the discursive analysis. The combination of content and discourse analysis follows Morgan's (2014) notion of 'complementary assistance' whereby in combining the strengths of the two methods the performance of both are increased. Having outlined the social, theoretical and

methodological significance of this study I provide a summary of this thesis, and outline the structure of the chapters that follow.

Thesis Summary

This study focuses on reader comments within three mainstream British news comment forums, the *BBC's World Have your Say*, *The Daily Mail's RightMinds* and *The Guardian's Comment is Free*, to assess whether, and to what extent, these virtual spaces can be viewed as hosting an online public sphere. Two theoretical frameworks are applied during data analysis comprising an initial small-scale content analysis complemented by a larger sociological discourse analysis. First, data are analysed against three of Dahlberg's (2001) online public sphere criteria: 'autonomy', 'discursive inclusion and equality' and 'exchange and critique'. Second, analytical tools drawn from Bakhtinian (1986) notions of utterance, speech genres and heteroglossia are applied to the data. This combination of methods was chosen in light of previous mixed-methods research in which Silva et al (2009:1) noted that "No single method was able to shed light on all aspects of our inquiry, lending support to the view that mixing methods is the most productive strategy for the investigation of complex social phenomena".

The agenda for the Bakhtinian discourse analysis included the following questions:

1. What social languages (genres) are identifiable in the forums?
2. How are words and grammatical structures used to quote, refer, or allude to other 'texts'?
3. How does a speaker's intonation contribute to the meaning of an utterance?
4. What kind of words and grammatical devices are used to denote significance?
5. What issues, debates, and claims are in evidence in which commenters anticipate prior knowledge and how do these relate to wider historical and social issues and debates?
6. What does a critical reading of the data uncover about:
 - (a) Claims to 'autonomy' in online debates;
 - (b) Commenter effects on equality of participation;
 - (c) The construction of online debates?

Exploration of key themes reveals that claims to autonomy within the forums are mitigated by the recirculation of social and cultural repertoires preventing complete ‘autonomy’ from State and commercial interests. With regard to ‘abuse’ within the forums, where research on ‘flaming’ has focused on the detrimental effects to political discussions where flaming/abuse deters participants from joining debates (Mitra, 1997), that it endangers the cohesiveness of online communities (Stivale, 1997) and that anonymous commenting leads to increased flaming (Mungeam, 2011). In this study, named commenters are both the instigators, and recipients of ‘abusive’ comments, yet it often appears as a catalyst for contributors to remain participating in debates. The structure of comments is also significant, with commenter-to-commenter deliberations containing specific validity claims leading to longer, more focused debates, aided by standardised, generic forms of utterance and double-voiced discourse.

In Chapter 3, my analysis begins by examining the contributions of participants to establish whether, and to what extent they can be regarded as participating in ‘autonomous debates’, free from State and commercial influence. To explore this issue I analyse the comments for evidence of autonomy from social, political and cultural repertoires, and the role of contributors in creating autonomy within the forums. An analysis of speech genres is undertaken, particularly concerning the style and tone of the utterances, and its effects on the construction of autonomous dialogue, along with an analysis of whether participation can be considered heteroglossic.

In Chapter 4, I analyse whether, and to what extent commenters exert influence on others within the forums, and the effects of such influence on the discursive inclusion and equality of participants, in conjunction with an analysis of the style and tone of the comments, with the analysis specifically focusing on ‘flaming’ behaviours and its links to domination within online debates. The analysis comprises examination of the comments for

evidence of ‘abuse’ in which contributors respond to the views of others using, among other ‘abusive’ characteristics, derisory language and personal insults. ‘Monopolisation’ is identified by contributors flooding the forums with numerous comments and using ‘abusive’ language to dominate the discourse, whilst ‘control of the agenda’ is described as a ‘subtle’ means of influencing the agenda of online debates.

In Chapter 5, I analyse whether, and to what extent commenters participate in ‘exchange and critique’. The analysis examines the comments for evidence of ‘dogmatic assertions’ (assertions made without giving valid reasons), ‘normative’ positions (seeking understanding and consensus), and ‘non-normative’ positions (not seeking understanding and consensus) and the specific internally and/or externally validated ‘criticisable validity claims’ contributors use to substantiate their arguments. The style, content and intonation of the comments are also assessed to offer insights into the ways in which contributors create and maintain deliberations within the forums.

Chapter 1

Literature Review

Habermas and the Public Sphere

The distinction between public and private life has passed down the centuries from ancient Greece. The private realm of the household (*oikos*) and the public realm of the city-state (*polis*) were clearly demarcated, where the *polis* was the site in which citizens came together and engaged in seemingly free and open debate concerning the issues of the day (Nevett, 1999). The distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ life has preoccupied Western thought since the age of antiquity. It has served as a point of entry to social and political analysis, moral and political debate and the structuring of everyday life (Weintraub, 1997). The distinction serves to demarcate what is ostensibly a private, individual, hidden world versus a public, collective, visible one.

However, the distinction underwent massive changes during the 17th and 18th centuries. With the rise of modern societies, the modern state emerged and expanded into the public realm through established structures of political control whilst capitalism penetrated the private realm. This resulted in the private sphere expanding to include private economic transactions along with family life, which in principle, meant each private field of action was beyond direct control from politics and the state. For Habermas (1989) this resulted in the emergence of a new space between the public and private realms, that of the ‘public sphere’.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) Habermas advocates the public sphere as an ideal type of bourgeois café culture in 18th Century London and Paris. It is defined as a single unitary space which should be understood as a sphere in which private citizens could come together and debate the issues of the day:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatised but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason (Habermas, 1989:27).

Habermas outlines the structural transformation of the public sphere in a particular historical epoch of European history. The public sphere existent within meetings in salons and coffee shops and in newspapers and other printed forms, gave voice to members of the public previously excluded from issues of governance (Poor, 2005). He conceived the public sphere as a new form of democracy that was corrupted and co-opted partly by the commercialisation of the press through advertising and entertainment resulting in his conception of the public sphere being fundamentally degraded today (Poor, 2005). He draws inspiration from an extensive assortment of philosophers and theorists to outline, and provide a normative understanding of, his ideal of a bourgeois public sphere and its emancipatory potential (Habermas, 1989). Among others, Habermas critically incorporates the key philosophical concepts of Kant's notion of practical reason, Hegel's concept of the civil society and Marx's criticism of public opinion, where victory of the better argument is achieved through use of reason and open debate (Baert, 2001).

According to Habermas (1989) society should put in place procedures that allow for open discussion and criticism. He argues that a public sphere adequate to a democratic polity needed both quality of discourse and quantity of participation (Habermas, 1984). He demonstrates the former by elaborating how the bourgeois public sphere revolved around 'ideal speech situations' in which rational-critical debates were open to all, and in which the merits of the 'better argument' were regarded over and above the identities of the participants (Calhoun, 1992). He elaborates on this further in his *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984) where he places communicative rationality in linguistically mediated interaction.

Such debates centre around a theory of ‘universal pragmatics’ (Habermas, 2000: 21) the building blocks of which being the correct representations of things (external nature), moral rightness of social rules (society) and issues of intentions and sincerity (internal nature) and that such debates also require the inclusion of ‘validity claims’ to support assertions (Habermas, 2000:53).

Habermas (2000:50) is concerned with ‘validity claims’ where people implicitly presuppose these culturally invariant concepts, ‘intelligibility’, ‘truth’, ‘moral rightness’ and ‘sincerity’. With the act of speaking, the content of what is said must make sense, must contain correct factual content, with a speaker justified in what they are saying and who are not attempting to deceive anyone. Habermas wants to promote ‘undistorted communication’ (Baert, 2001:88) that is allowing people to openly defend and criticise validity claims. This becomes possible through the public sphere acting as “a network of communicating information and points of view [which are] filtered and synthesised in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified *public* opinions” (Habermas, 1996:360) (Original emphasis). By private citizens coming together to form a public and debating issues of the day in this way, Habermas (1989) argues his public sphere ideal comes into effect.

Criticisms of Habermas’ Public Sphere

Whilst Habermas’ (1989) public sphere conception remains significant in the development and ongoing functioning of modern societies, certain elements of his views are challenged by a number of critics. Habermas (1989) has been criticised for his idealised version of the early bourgeois public sphere, for failing to address systematic exclusions of certain groups, such as the working classes, the uneducated and women (Calhoun, 1999). In her study on 19th Century women’s movements and their struggles for political equality and social justice, Ryan (1992:285) argues that the history of women’s politics highlights the dangers of a singular, centralised concept of the public sphere. Furthermore, Fraser (1992)

highlights the inadequacy of the public sphere concept to enable those who are most disenfranchised and in need of a voice, to express their views in a public realm dominated by bourgeoisie values which leads to “those most remote from public authorities and governmental institutions...sometimes [having to] resort to shrill tones, civil disobedience, and even violent acts to make themselves heard” (Fraser, 1992: 285-6).

Benhabib (1992) also criticises Habermas’ (1989) exclusionary conception of public discourse in which rational-critical debates take precedence when discussing public issues. It is Benhabib’s (1992:89-90) contention that women have been confined to “typically female spheres of activity like housework; reproduction; nurture and care for the young, the sick, and the elderly” which relegates these issues into the private realm and thus outside the remit of public debate. According to Benhabib (1992:93) the exclusion of private issues from the public domain has led to the oppression and exploitation of women in the private realm. She argues that private issues must be understood as public issues of common concern by making them “increasingly accessible to debate, reflection, action and moral political transformation” in which private issues become accessible to discursive will formation subsequently democratising those issues and bringing them under standards of moral reflection (Benhabib, 1992:94).

The accuracy of Habermas’ historical account of the early public sphere has also been called into question. Eley (1992:304-6) argues that Habermas failed to take into account that reasoned exchange also became available for non-bourgeois groups ranging from the radical intelligentsia to the peasantry, and that he does not acknowledge combative competing publics, such as those formed within the illiterate and literate ranks of the working classes. Habermas’ (1989) supposition concerning the alleged decline of the public sphere has also been challenged. Schudson (1997) argues that there is little evidence that a true ideal public ever existed, suggesting instead that there is less agreement, and specificity as to when and

where an era of better political health ever existed or what happened to it. He suggests that rather than hankering after the bourgeois public sphere conception in a very different contemporary society, it is more productive to consider the conditions and possibilities for rational-critical and fair-minded political practices applicable today (Schudson, 1992:61).

Habermas' (1989) position also came under attack from poststructuralists such as Lyotard (1984), who questioned Habermas' Enlightenment ideal of the rational subject and the emancipatory potential of consensus through rational debate. Arguing against Habermas' (1989) ideal of a single overarching public sphere built on consensus, Lyotard (1984) suggests that anarchy, individuality and disagreement have and can lead to democratic emancipation. However, such acts go against Habermas' (1989) apparent advocacy for suppressing pluralism in public discourse (Delanty, 1999). Mouffe (2000) has also criticised Habermas (1989) on the grounds that true plurality is impossible to find within a modern or post-modern deliberative democracy based on consensus. Where Habermas (1989) champions the link existing between the democratic ideal of the Enlightenment and its focus on consensus, rationalistic and universalistic undertones, Mouffe (2000) proposes an 'agonistic pluralism' consisting of a "vibrant clash of democratic political positions" which, she argues, is more applicable to contemporary pluralist societies (Mouffe, 2000:104).

The focus on plurality has also been taken up by theorists such as Negt and Kluge (1993) who argue against Habermas' (1989) public sphere criteria by articulating the notion of an oppositional public sphere, in their case, that of the proletariat public sphere. Their analysis moved the focus of the public sphere away from a historico-transcendental idealisation of the Enlightenment to a plurality of discourses (Negt & Kluge, 1993). In contrast to Habermas' critique of liberalism, with a public sphere that universalizes and monopolizes the political, Negt and Kluge (1993) decentralize and multiply the public sphere.

In arguing for multiplicity within the public sphere, Nancy Fraser (1992) criticises Habermas' (1989) focus on promoting consensus through communicative reason arguing that this results in the suppression of dissent and homogenisation of public debate. It is Fraser's (1990:66) contention that "in stratified societies, arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public" (1990:66). As such, "an egalitarian, multicultural society necessitates a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetorics participate" (1990:69). Therefore, it is argued that Habermas' (1989) theory for a single, unitary public sphere is untenable faced with the pluralistic multiplicity of competing public arenas.

Lincoln Dahlberg's Online Public Sphere

In Lincoln Dahlberg's (2000) thesis *The Internet and the Public Sphere: A Critical Analysis of the Possibility of Online Discourse Enhancing Deliberative Democracy* he defends Habermas' (1989) Public Sphere theory and reinterprets it for application to the online environment. He sets out seven criteria that must be present in order for online debates to satisfy his online public sphere requirements¹, refined to six criteria in his later work (e.g. Dahlberg, 2001a). The six criteria include: autonomy from state and monetary influence, exchange and critique, reflexivity, ideal role taking, sincerity, and discursive inclusion and equality (Dahlberg, 2001a). Here I provide a brief overview of the six criteria before considering criticisms of his work. I then go on to a more in-depth exploration of the three criteria that are the subject of this thesis, 'autonomy', 'discursive inclusion and equality' and 'exchange and critique'.

Dahlberg's (2001a) first criterion, autonomy from state and commercial interests is based on Habermas' (1989) argument that purposive rationality is coordinated by money and

¹ In his original analysis Dahlberg (2000) outlined seven criteria, 'autonomy', 'thematization and critique of criticisable moral-practical validity claims', 'reflexivity', 'ideal role taking', 'sincerity', 'inclusion', and 'discursive equality' (2000:56-59).

power based on interest positions. Money and power “replace language as a mechanism for coordinating action. They set social action loose from integration through value consensus and switch it over to purposive rationality steered by media” (Habermas, 1984:342).

Joss Hands (2011:101) has argued that Habermas’ negative reading of the relationship between technology, money and power blinds him to the potential that technology can bring to increasing multiplicity and dissent. He suggests that “Habermas sees technology as a purely material object...existing only as a tool for the purposes of manipulating things – that is, acting instrumentally on the world and manipulatively on others” (Hands, 2011:100).

These issues surrounding manipulation through media are reproduced in Dahlberg’s (2001a) first criteria, which aim to ensure that communicative rationality, founded on reaching understanding, takes precedence over influences from State or commercial interests:

Autonomy from State and Monetary Influence:

Discourse must be based on the concerns of citizens as a public rather than driven by the media of money and administrative power that facilitate the operations of the market and state (Dahlberg, 2001a).

Dahlberg’s (2001a) second criteria is based on Habermas’ (1989) supposition that argumentation demands the putting forward, and subsequent critique of political claims that are criticisable, and that are supported by reasons rather than based on assertions (Habermas, 1984: 25-6, 1990: 87-88):

Exchange and Critique of Criticisable Moral-practical Validity Claims:

Rational-critical discourse involves engaging in reciprocal critique of normative positions that are provided with reasons and thus are criticisable, that is, open to critique rather than dogmatically asserted (Dahlberg, 2001a).

The third criterion is based on Habermas’ (1992a:449) demand that “participants question and transcend whatever their initial preferences may have been” and arguing that by examining pre-discursive positions within discourse, publicly oriented citizens can be separated from privately oriented individuals. As such, Dahlberg (2000:57) argues that

reciprocal critique becomes meaningless if participants do not change their views when found wanting presupposing the need for ‘reflexivity’:

Reflexivity:

Communicative rationality demands reflexivity: the critical examination of one’s cultural values, assumptions, and interests, as well as the larger social context. The examination of pre-discursive positions within discourse distinguishes publicly oriented citizens from private individuals (Dahlberg, 2000:57).

Dahlberg (2000) argues that reflexive participants must demonstrate communicative competence to critically distance themselves from their own position and to question the sources of validity outside of argumentation. However, more important is that participants accept challenges to reflexivity when supported by validity claims. This presupposes individuals listening to the arguments and reasoning of others, to put oneself in the other’s shoes, a practice he describes as ‘ideal role-taking’ (2000:57).

Therefore, Dahlberg’s (2001) fourth criterion is based on mutual understanding, whereby they put themselves in the position of the other and try to understand the situation from their point of view (Habermas, 1987a, 1996). This demands participants engage in practices such as treating all arguments impartially, fairly and without bias, of mutual respect based on the assumption that the other has something worthwhile to say, which presupposes respectful listening, seeking understanding and agreement, and to work through differences rather than aggravating conflict:

Ideal role taking:

Participants must attempt to understand the argument from the other's perspective. This requires a commitment to an ongoing dialogue with difference in which interlocutors respectfully listen to each other (Dahlberg, 2001a).

The fifth criterion concerns the sincerity of participants, based on Habermas’ (1984:99) supposition that “the manifest intention of the speaker is meant as it is expressed”. According to Dahlberg (2000:58) “Dialogue in the public sphere is premised upon publicity or discursive openness in contrast to deception”. Participants must demonstrate consistency across and between their speech acts (Chambers, 1996:208) and make known all relevant

information about their intentions, interests, needs and desires in order for their arguments to be rationally judged (Benhabib, 1992:109):

Sincerity:

Each participant must make a sincere effort to make known all information, including their true intentions, interests, needs, and desires, as relevant to the particular problem under consideration (Dahlberg, 2001a).

Dahlberg (2000) argues that all of the above criteria are predicated on the notion that participants can inclusively and equally participate in arguments. This is based on Habermas' (1984:25) supposition that when presenting criticisable validity claims no force should be exerted "whether it arises from within the process of reaching understanding itself (internal coercion) or influences it from the outside (external coercion) – except the force of the better argument". Dahlberg (2000:58) argues that even when inclusivity is formalised, informal restrictions resulting from social and inequalities can still apply. Limitations to inclusion may involve inequalities from outside of discourse such as material wealth or educational achievement deemed necessary for participation, or inequalities within discourse where some dominate the discourse leading others to feel excluded or leave the debate altogether (Dahlberg, 2000:58):

Discursive inclusion and equality:

Every participant affected by the validity claims under consideration is equally entitled to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever. Inclusion can be limited by inequalities from outside of discourse - by formal or informal restrictions to access. It can also be limited by inequalities within discourse, where some dominate discourse and others struggle to get their voices heard (Dahlberg, 2001a).

With communicative rationality demanding that "everyone has an equal opportunity to introduce and question any assertion whatever and to express attitudes, desires, and needs" (Dahlberg, 2000:59), the demand for inclusivity within debates "overlaps with, and presupposes, discursive equality" (Dahlberg, 2000:58).

Criticisms of Dahlberg's Online Public Sphere

Whilst the reception of Dahlberg's (2000) online public sphere criteria has been largely positive, some criticisms have emerged. Dahlberg has received similar criticisms to Habermas for an 'idealised' set of normative criteria within the public sphere that have no empirical foundation in which "concrete procedures for measuring the dimensions have not been given by Dahlberg, largely because he has not applied the proposed dimensions to an empirical study" Jankowski and van Os (2002, in Janssen & Kies, 2005:11).

Poor (2005) criticises Dahlberg's (2001) six criteria for its focus on a single public sphere and less on one sphere within a multiple of public spheres, a view shared by Ubayasiri (2007:8) who criticises Dahlberg's approach arguing that "the analysis fails to address the fragmented nature of the Internet and continue to theorise on one single overarching Internet based public sphere – a futile pursuit in [a] virtual world which mirrors the fragmented nature of contemporary society" (Ubayasiri, 2007:8).

Furthermore, Yearwood (2010) has argued that, as with Habermas, Dahlberg follows the procedures required to participate in an online public sphere instead of focusing on the content of exchanges therein. Instead of evaluating and producing categories more applicable to the Internet and contemporary society, Dahlberg (2000) focuses on Habermasian ideals not necessarily applicable to the online context. He is accused of avoiding conflation between (new) media and the public sphere (Carpentier, 2011:86). As Dahlberg's (2006) six criteria have now been outlined, I move on to a more detailed account of three of Dahlberg's (2001a) criteria chosen for this study 'autonomy', 'discursive inclusion and equality' and 'exchange and critique'.

Dahlberg's 'Autonomy'

Dahlberg (2000:129) argues that state and corporate colonisation of cyberspace threatens the autonomy of the online public sphere by replacing 'rational communication'

with ‘instrumental rationality’. He argues that state censorship of the internet along with online surveillance threatens free speech and public interaction online through a variety of measures such as official blocks and covert monitoring. According to Dahlberg (2000), the increasing privatisation and commercialisation of cyberspace is the greatest threat to online public discursive spaces. The speed at which cyberspace has been commercialised and the increasing control of Internet infrastructure by major corporate players is “leading towards a consumer-oriented cyberspace that promises to either marginalise online public discourse or incorporate it within privatised and individualised forms of interaction: online commerce, entertainment and business communication” (Dahlberg, 2001a).

Dahlberg (2001a) suggests that it is difficult for non-commercial sites to compete in commercially-dominated online space, and is equally difficult for democratically-oriented sites which are increasingly being hosted or run by corporate ventures who promote “individualised consumer-oriented politics that allows politicians to sell their messages directly to citizens online without the mediation of public discourse”. Whilst Dahlberg (2001a) considers cyberspace to be under threat from corporate and state interference, he acknowledges there are a diverse array of non-commercial, non-state controlled interactive spaces such as email lists, chat lines, and Web publishing that are unaffiliated to any political party, interest group, or corporate concern and that some of this communication “facilitates the growth and coordination of a global culture of resistance to the corporate takeover of cyberspace and of public life in general” (Dahlberg, 2001a).

For Dahlberg, the Internet is a place which stimulates critical debate. Whilst he does not believe that online spaces are fully autonomous from the state and corporate influence, he acknowledges that they can provide a site for the expansion of public deliberation and can contribute to the development of rational-critical discourse in the wider public sphere. However, Dahlberg (2001a) notes that observed online interaction has not yet been

established as a viable form of communication within the public sphere discourse, and that this form of interaction requires further scrutiny.

Consequently, Dahlberg (2001a) questions the efficacy of the potential for autonomy in an online public sphere. His concerns rest on the idea that the state and commercial powers may have too much opportunity to influence online debates. He postulates that non-commercial and non-state controlled sites can be said to be 'autonomous' in the sense that they resist the corporate takeover of cyberspace and public life more generally (Dahlberg, 2001a). Autonomous debate within cyberspace needs to be free from state or commercial influence for it to be classed as part of an online public sphere. Debate is a key word here as an online public sphere cannot be said to exist without participants debating issues of public concern (Dahlberg, 2001a). This leads to the second criteria for analysis, that of 'discursive inclusion and equality' which refers to concerns Dahlberg (2000) has over the equal and inclusive opportunities for all comments to have their views heard within online forums.

'Autonomy' and Contemporary Media

Recent developments in information, communications and computing technologies have brought a change to the media landscape (Moe, 2010; Jenkins et al, 2013). The digital revolution has allowed the expansion of communication and information channels through which news media operates. Pre-Internet organisations have taken advantage of these new technologies by increasing the ways in which news is disseminated through cyberspace with the added advantage that such reporting is quick, interactive, low cost, allows networking capabilities and has global reach (Psychogiouloulou, 2014:24). As competition has strengthened so traditional print news and broadcasting have been combined within the online sphere necessitating that producers adapt to engaging with users in a more immediate way.

Whilst traditional sources of news have been expanding online, so a new set of news services have emerged that are 'online only' news operators that provide information only

services including professional journalists' and citizen journalists' blogs and other user-generated information services. Where it is argued that the traditional role of the media has been to mediate public communication to a large audience, more recently

Technological developments that made on-demand delivery of content, conditional access and content personalisation possible have stirred debate on how public communication should henceforth be conceived so has the capacity of the Internet to support and blend various types of communication (Psychogiouloulou, 2014:24).

The notion of a 'free and independent media' are considered to be a cornerstone of democratic society, though defining just what makes media 'free and independent' is hard to define. Whilst the freedom of the media once concerned reducing State control, it is now also connected to private forms of constraint on media activity, raising questions as to the freedom from influence of these new media conglomerates (Anagnostou et al, 2010:25). Factors affecting the freedom and independence of media cannot now only be understood in terms of State interference being constraining and private market-driven media being free (Christians et al, 2009; Curran, 2010) as whilst the media may achieve autonomy from State interference, it may continue to offer biased or inaccurate reporting (Psychogiouloulou, 2014:26).

This falls into the domain that the media are under duty to impart information and ideas of public interest due to the public's right to be informed. However, it is possible for the State to intervene to secure a plural media environment suggesting that neither the media, nor the individuals who own or work for it have an absolute right to free expression (Psychogiouloulou, 2014). Despite the widespread acknowledgement that freedom of expression is essential to democracy, a variety of pressures are exerted on contemporary media which may undermine their decision making process (Czepek et al, 2009). These pressures can be from the world of politics, business, commercial pressures, human rights failures, suppression of information in the public interest or the provision of biased and inaccurate reporting (Psychogiouloulou, 2014:29).

However, the most direct form of influence over reporting comes from media owners who can define the editorial line for their news outlets. This is particularly true in the printed press who have legitimately adopted a specific political identity as a manifestation of free speech, permitted on the proviso that their political alignment is transparent and a distinction is made between fact and value judgements (Psychogiouloulou, 2014). However, adopting a particular political identity does not legitimise interference from news management, editorial or journalistic practices that serve particular goals (Psychogiouloulou, 2014:29).

Such influences may not come into the newsroom directly; instead media owners may appoint particular managers and promote 'self-censorship' so that employees are acutely aware of the expectations of their employer which can potentially lead to information being held back, withdrawn or distorted. The risk increases when media owners also enjoy a powerful market position. (Psychogiouloulou, 2014:29). Finance is another motivation for media outlets to report on particular topics. All media funding is potentially problematic as with the *BBC* being publicly funded through the license fee, which creates the potential for political pressure undermining the commitment to investigating and reporting on Government action. Private funding through advertising, sponsorship or donations may lead benefactors into overlooking stories on specific companies or individuals out of a sense of loyalty to their backers. Commercial funding may also influence the overall content of publications ensuring services with wider appeal are promoted to the detriment of information services or services encouraging debates on matters of public interest (Psychogiouloulou, 2014:29).

In order to report on matters of public interest, media organisations require access to information. Much of this information is controlled by Government and their press offices who can exert influence as to what is reported, when and how. Information can be withheld, delayed, distorted or come with a caveat for positive news coverage arising from its use. Whilst the Internet is heralded as allowing faster access to wider range of sources, due to

budget cuts and the 24 hour news culture, journalists are compelled to create more content in less time across multiple platforms (Curran, 2011; Davies, 2008). To achieve what is asked of them, journalists may use recycled agency material, press releases and online content, “promoting a deskbound, imitative form of journalism that entails significant disjuncture between what citizens need to know and what reaches them as ‘newsworthy’ information” (Psychogiouloulou, 2014:30).

Further restraints to media reporting can come from media regulation, which can be applied in ways that permit undue interference. Even under the ‘free speech’ proviso, legal issues such as defamation, state secrets and corporate confidentiality can be legitimately curtailed, and re-framed in pursuit of the ‘public interest’. Additionally, other laws and regulations including taxation, public advertising, government aid or other commercial advantages or appointments for public service media can be framed, or applied, in ways that can exert political pressure (Psychogiouloulou, 2014:30).

Similarly to their offline counterparts, online public service and commercial media encounter the same pressures. Whilst ‘independent’ media are not prone to the influence of Government or corporate interests, they experience significant financial pressures largely due to a lack of funding (Curran, 2011:19). As largely amateur, non-commercial, small-scale publishers, these independent media have less resources at their disposal making time pressures to investigate stories and cross-check sources more significant (Couldry, 2010). In addition, much digital content now passes through ‘intermediaries’ who may be subject to political or commercial pressures resulting in them limiting the capability of certain media to reach their target audience (Psychogiouloulou, 2014:31).

From this analysis, it is clear that media activity is subject to a number of ‘dependencies’. Financial concerns, access to information, media ownership, pressures arising from technology and undue restrictions from legal frameworks “render the media

dependent and therefore prone to patronage”. As a consequence, “no media outlet or media system in its entirety can claim, or even attain everlasting, complete independence from all the dependency factors outlined above” (Psychogiouloulou, 2014:31). As such the type of ‘independence’ that the media achieve is a relative feature concerned with its ability to fulfil its democratic purposes, despite a number of pressures to which they are subjected.

Milioni (2009: 427) furthers Dahlberg’s (2006) conception of ‘autonomous debates’ suggesting that interactivity plays a key role: “Interactivity refers to the unprecedented capability for horizontal communication among users of new technologies, and as a structural condition of the public sphere, to a vertical two-way flow of communication” where publics “use these discursive, open online spaces as a platform for publicly exposing their matters of concern, expressing their views and engaging in political conversation” allowing “participants [to] debate argumentatively about the issues under consideration and define, autonomously and intersubjectively, the rules and terms of their own discussion”. According to Coleman (2008), this should allow commenters to have more autonomy to set their own agendas and for transgressive discussions to develop.

However, that people regularly rely on information that is prepared by others is deemed to be detrimental to self-autonomy (Woo, 2006:957). That individuals may no longer engage with issues that they have directly experienced or intentionally researched is determined by the degree of individual responsibility that they exercise (Woo, 2006:957). Consequently, the degree of autonomy expressed within online comment forums may be dependent upon the variety of ways in which contributors learn about and discuss political issues. Moreover, Maynor (2009) observed from his study on blogging and democracy, that the extent to which contributors engage in the deliberative process affects individual autonomy and may also be dependent upon the medium through which contributors engage with others. As such, ‘autonomy’ in online forums should not only be considered from the

purview of the level of autonomy experienced by media organisations, but also whether, or to what extent contributors express autonomous views in online forums.

Dahlberg's 'Discursive Inclusion and Equality'

Dahlberg (2000:164-7) argues that despite formal accessibility to the Internet and its rapid expansion, inclusion within online debates is inhibited by social inequalities and cultural differences such as gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status but also by poor telecommunication infrastructure and state censorship. Furthermore, he argues even when access is available, many people do not have the money, education or time to participate nor do they have the technical and community support necessary to engage in political deliberation, leading to nothing more than "an elite public sphere" (2000:164-5). Given such exclusions he questions whether inclusion and equality is experienced within Internet fora.

Within Dahlberg's (2001a) conception of discursive inclusion and equality a distinction must be made between 'inclusivity' (2000:269) and 'inclusiveness' (2000:232) as two separate criteria. According to Dahlberg (2001a) 'inclusiveness' refers to the process by which *all* manner of comments and perspectives should be equally included within online debate. 'Inclusivity' refers to issues such as gender; ethnicity and socio-economic status, which can affect a person's access to online participation (see Albrecht, 2006).

Dahlberg (2000:197) argues that much of the literature on online participation focus on the 'blindness' of cyberspace in which social hierarchies and power relations are levelled out by the lack of bodily identity, allowing participants to interact as if they were equals. Arguments are measured on the merits of the points made rather than being based on the social position of the poster. However, inequalities offline are often also present online leading to the reassertion of authority and power differentials, which in turn may limit discursive equality and inclusion (Dahlberg, 2000:197).

Dahlberg (2000:198) suggests there are three ways in which commenters can dominate online forums, through ‘abusive’ comments, ‘monopolising’ attention, and being in ‘control of the agenda’. Dahlberg (2001a) argues that the simplest way to silence others in online debates is by posting ‘abusive’ comments. These comments not only contain instances of ‘flaming’ (Lee, 2005) but also aim to belittle and humiliate others. Dahlberg (2000:198) argues that abusive comments are largely directed toward those with less power in cyberspace, particularly women, and non-white ethnic groups. Yet, even when individual identities are unknown, racist, sexist and other abuse can be extremely upsetting for the recipients (Dahlberg, 2000:198). Consequently, recipients of ‘abusive’ posts may be silenced within particular online debates, or withdraw from participating in online debates altogether (Dahlberg, 2000). Where some commenters may dominate online debates through posting ‘abusive’ comments, others attempt to do so by ‘monopolising’ attention.

Dahlberg (2000:198) argues that a more damaging practice in online debates results from individuals and groups who ‘monopolise’ attention. This results in a small number of contributors being responsible for the majority of comments, whilst the majority post infrequently and largely ‘lurk’ - reading messages but not posting comments (Dahlberg, 2000:198). However, he argues that the uneven distribution of comments across a group’s population does not necessarily indicate, or indeed lead to, exclusions and inequalities (Dahlberg, 2000:198). Theoretically, whilst all contributors have an equal opportunity to post comments, some commenters may choose to engage with debates but not actively participate by posting comments. This does not necessarily indicate a lack of commitment, or that they choose not to comment due to the likelihood of receiving ‘abusive’ posts or not being listened to (Dahlberg, 2000:199).

However, there are occasions when “sometimes inconsiderate and noisy individuals” do monopolise discussions (Dahlberg, 2000:199). This argument is supported by Watson’s

(1997) study in which interactions on Usenet groups were found to be dominated by a few posters who submitted comments for the sake of doing so, rather than for having something constructive to say. Such posters largely comprise educated, white, English-speaking men, who regularly monopolise the attention in online conversations (Dahlberg, 2000:199). Yet, whilst measures can be taken to reduce ‘abusive’ comments and ‘monopolisation’ of debates, Dahlberg’s (2000) third concern over domination that of ‘control of the agenda’, is more difficult to detect.

Dahlberg (2000:199) argues that commenters who ‘control the agenda’ do so not by being abusive or posting more comments. They assert influence and side-line the arguments of others by dictating the agenda and style of dialogue. He suggests that these ‘dominant voices’ are those who have developed online authority, and most often these commenters are educated, white, English-speaking men (Dahlberg, 2000:199). As an example of discursive inequality online, Dahlberg (2000) refers to the gendering of participants in online debates. He refers to Susan Herrings’ (1993, 1996, 1999²) research in which she discovered that male dominance arises from ‘male-style’ interactions. These interactions are characterised by longer, more frequent posts that are “issue-oriented, assertive, authoritative, adversarial, sarcastic and self-promoting” (Dahlberg, 2000:200). In contrast, ‘female-style’ interactions are “shorter, personally-oriented, questioning, tentative, apologetic, and supportive” (Dahlberg, 2000:200).

Thus, Dahlberg (2000:200) asserts that gender inequalities and exclusions provide clear evidence of the failure of cyber-discourse to approximate the requirements of inclusion and equality, though he accepts that inequalities may reduce with greater participation by women and ethnic groups, and that the development of ‘netiquette’ and moderation may also improve discursive inclusion and equality. However, ‘netiquette’ does not imply that actions

² For more recent analysis, see: Herring, S. C. (1999). ‘The rhetorical dynamics of gender harassment on-line’. *The Information Society*, 15(3), 151-167.

such as flaming are forbidden in online debates. Indeed, Shea (1994:78) argues that flaming is a good way of “stopping someone from doing something (like offending other people)”. As such, flaming can be regarded as “an acceptable means efficiently dealing with annoying abusive, and ignorant online behaviour” (Dahlberg, 2000:202).

In addition, Dahlberg (2000:201) has some concerns over the efficacy of monitoring commenting and moderation practices. He suggests that despite attempts to enforce ‘reasonable’ interactions using netiquette, or official moderation (Dahlberg, 2000:201), such practices are often undermined by cleverly forged posts or anonymous commenting (Pfaffenberger, 1996). Consequently, moderation practices may only have limited effects, as was found in Hill and Hughes (1998) study where poorly defined and implemented moderation practices, had little effect on flaming.

Dahlberg (2000) concludes that discursive exclusions and inequalities continue to feature in online interaction despite attempts to curb its prevalence through netiquette and moderation. He argues that “discursive inequalities and exclusions result from the uneven distribution of power in the wider society...at present online discourse, including the very rules of discourse themselves, tend to be biased in favour of those individuals and groups that dominate offline discourse” (2000:203).

Flaming in Online Debates

In online debates ‘abusive’ responses to the comments of others are largely categorised by researchers as ‘uncivil’ or ‘flaming’ (Ng & Detenber, 2006). Researchers who focus on ‘incivility’ are likely to define it in terms of “features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics” (Coe et al, 2014:660). With regards ‘flaming’ researchers broadly tend to define it in terms of “aggressive or hostile communication occurring via computer-mediated channels” (O’Sullivan, 2003:70) though more specifically it has been regarded in terms of “the hostile

expression of strong emotions and feelings (Lea et al, 1992), “vicious attacks” (Dvorak, 1994), “antisocial interaction” (Thompson, 1996) and the “uninhibited expression of hostility, insults, and ridicule” (Kayany, 1998). The type of behaviour associated with flaming should not be confused with other similar yet distinct concepts such as ‘trolling’ (Hmielowski et al, 2014). Where flaming is considered to be an uninhibited reaction to a real or perceived aggressive comment, trolling entails deception, baiting and aggressive language to provoke a response (Hardaker, 2010).

Many studies on the comment forums of online news organisations have focused on anonymity and its apparent relationship to ‘abusive’ practices (Rowe, 2015). Online comment forums were intended to allow contributors to share their opinions, and perspectives on contemporary topics as part of a process of public deliberation, but instead are argued to have become sites of “crudity, bigotry, meanness and plain nastiness” (Pitts Jr, 2010 in Rowe, 2014:11). Whilst some comment forums require a user to register a username before they can post comments, those who do not have discovered that this leads to aggressive content posted by some contributors (Boczkowski, 1999; Pitts, 2010).

Such behaviours are implicitly and explicitly linked to computer-mediated-communication (Thompson, 1996; Thompson & Foulger, 1996). Common explications as to the flaming nature of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) include the lack of non-verbal cues such as gesticulation, facial expressions and tone of voice (O’Sullivan & Flanagan, 2003). More recent studies on flaming have also discovered that a variety of variables predict the use of abusive language such as the lack of social identity (Hardaker, 2010; Moore, 2010), the perceived intent of the message (Hardaker, 2010), and individual difference variables (Hutchens et al 2014) which contribute to flaming intention.

Yet, empirical research on online user comment forums has suggested that the prevalence of ‘uncivil’ or ‘flaming’ behaviour is not as substantial as one might expect

(Canter, 2013; Ruiz et al, 2011). However, research has also shown a significant number of online political discussions include insulting and aggressive behaviours (Papacharissi, 2004). Therefore, it can be argued that a link may exist between discussing political issues online and flaming behaviour, resulting in flaming being considered as an acceptable part of that discursive process (Hmielowski et al, 2014).

Recent research has shown that a relationship exists between greater perceived acceptability of aggressive behaviours and intending to be aggressive (Ang et al, 2010; Burton et al, 2013; Zhen et al, 2011). Moreover, Hmielowski et al (2014) have assessed whether verbal aggression increases the likelihood of flaming behaviour in political discussions. Verbal aggression is defined as “attacking the person’s self-concept rather than the topic of the conversation” (Infante, 1987 in Hmielowski et al, 2014:1201). With regard to the relationship between flaming intention and verbal aggression, Hmielowski et al (2014) proposed the following hypothesis:

there should be a positive indirect effect of discussing politics online through greater acceptance of flaming...Moreover, this positive indirect effect should be moderated by verbal aggression, with those higher in verbal aggression showing greater intention to flame (2014:1201).

The results of their study revealed that discussing political issues online plays an important role in developing normative beliefs about the acceptability of flaming. The presence of flaming in online contexts (Papacharissi, 2004; Upadhyay, 2010) may lead to aggressive behaviours being considered as acceptable, with the relationship between acceptability of flaming and flaming intention varying by verbal aggression: the more verbally aggressive the contributor, the higher the likelihood of flaming (Hmielowski et al, 2014:1206). These varying degrees of ‘verbal aggression’ could also be considered in the form of ‘flaming intensity’, that is the level of aggressiveness within a comment. Thompsen and Foulger (1996) suggest five levels of flaming intensity within online debates (see Figure 7). The levels of intensity, proposed by Thompsen and Foulger (1996), range from low

intensity ‘divergent’ viewpoints to high intensity ‘profanely antagonistic’ comments. This range of intensity allows for all manner of comments to be measured against ‘flaming’ criteria though many do not fit the definition of flaming as ‘aggressive’ or ‘hostile’ (O’Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003:70). This difficulty in defining ‘flaming’ is reflected in the lack of strongly distinguished characteristics for ‘flaming’ online, despite numerous attempts by scholars to do so (Lea et al, 1992; Thompsen, 1996).

These different levels of intensity to flaming form part of literature on the non-threatening nature of ‘flaming’ in online debates (Papacharissi, 2004). The results from a study by Millard (1997) prompted the conclusion that ‘flaming’ should be recuperated and separated from personal criticism. Moreover Benson (1996:374) also claimed a “demonstrable faith of some sort in the power of argument and passionate advocacy amidst the flaming and the name-calling”. His findings brought him to the conclusion that whilst online debates may be aggressive, insulting and often attempt to humiliate others they also contain a high degree of regularity, free speech, and are attentive to the arguments of others, allowing free participation and a political forum in which divergent views are expressed (Benson, 1996). Moreover, Papacharissi (2004:266) argues that whilst “civil conversation may...be the soul of democracy” it only works if “we do not impose stringent rules on discussion, and expect a discourse that is so polite and restrained that it is barely human”.

As such a level of ‘abusiveness’ or ‘flaming’ in online debates is not necessarily considered as antithesis to participation in online deliberations. Whilst much research has focused on the degree of flaming in online fora, and the intentions of those engaged in ‘flaming’ practices, less attention has been paid to the use of flaming in debates as a means to provoke participation. Rather than viewed as a negative factor in online debates, ‘flaming’ could be conceived as a catalyst for sustaining debates within online fora. As such, ‘flaming’ may not necessarily lead to a lack of inclusiveness and equality of participation.

Domination of Debates

A great deal of research has focused on certain commenters ‘monopolising’ the attention of others in online debates. Schneider (1997:85) observed that some contributors are better at making themselves heard than others with 80 percent of comments being submitted by fewer than 5 percent of the participants. Beyers’ (2004) study of an online newspaper observed that 957 users were responsible for posting 10,201 comments an average of 10.7 comments each. In her study, Maria Torres Da Silva (2013:105) analysed the online version of two Portuguese newspapers *Publico* and *Expresso* in the light of public sphere criteria. She observed that 303 comments were posted by 104 contributors, an average of 2.9 comments per user, but that domination was higher for certain users in *Expresso* averaging 4.7 comments per user. As such, certain contributors can be understood as dominating, or in Dahlbergian terms ‘monopolising’ the forums.

The ‘equal voice’ perspective (Schneider, 1997; Graham, 2002; Jensen, 2003) analyses the ‘distribution of voice’ which is based on the assumption that if a small number of contributors are responsible for a large number of comments then they dominate the debate (Janssen & Kies, 2005:24). From the results of his study Schneider (1997) concludes that when a great many messages are posted by a small group of participants this creates inequality within online debates. However, Schneider (1997) argues that for participation to be considered equal, each contributor should post the same number of comments. This assertion does not take into account that some contributors may need to post more comments than others in order to make their point. Thus equality should not be measured in isolation against the number of comments made, as Jensen (2003 in Janssen & Kies, 2005:24) note that “although we can conclude that a small number of participants are very active...it is difficult to conclude whether these individuals dominate the debates” and consequently, whether they create exclusivity and inequality of participation.

Whilst Schultz (2000:215) has suggested that there is the possibility that some commenters may dominate debates and threaten the participatory opportunities of others, Himelboim et al (2009) argue that commenters who are most able to evoke contributions from others “play a unique social role as the introducers of discussion topics” (Himelboim et al, 2009). For contributors to control the agenda, their views must be presented and replied to consistently by a number of commenters, however, they also found that some individuals attract a disproportionate number of replies to their comments, and that only a limited number of messages and authors receive replies (Himelboim et al, 2009). Furthermore, commenters who provoke replies often do so due to their lack of civility and rational argumentation in their posts (Constantinescu & Tedesco, 2007; Lee, 2005, Singer & Ashman, 2009).

Consequently, contributors who post a high proportion of comments may on the one hand encourage debates within the forums, and on the other, may be responsible for monopolising the forums and controlling the agenda. In both cases, for commenters to engage in discursive discourses within online fora they must meet Dahlberg’s (2001a) third criteria that of ‘exchange and critique’. These criteria demand that contributors participate in presenting ‘normative’ positions supported by specific ‘criticisable validity claims’, thus engaging in ‘rational-critical’ debates rather than making unsupported ‘dogmatic assertions’.

Dahlberg’s ‘Exchange and Critique’

Dahlberg (2000:183) argues there is a certain ‘rhythm’ to computer-mediated communication which parallel “the rational, dialogic form of conversation required within the public sphere”. He refers to Kolb’s (1996) study of email and mailing lists, who suggests there is a certain pattern to online debates, in which contributors engage in shorter messages in a point-for-point exchange of statements and rebuttals, more like an animated conversation. Dahlberg (2000:183) argues that the dialogic structure of CMC is also present within newsgroups, chatlines, Web fora, and other Internet media. He argues that around the

globe thousands of individuals participate in critical dialogue which requires the putting forward and subsequent critique of claims made on “every conceivable question on a myriad of online groups” (Dahlberg, 2000:183). He also suggests that research has identified a ‘lively exchange of opinions’ (Katz, 1997; Hauben and Hauben, 1997; and Rheingold, 1993 in Dahlberg, 2000:183). Moreover, Dahlberg (2000:183) argues that research supports his contention that there is a “critical dialogic nature [to] much online chat” such as Hill and Hughes (1998) research into political Usenet groups and (AOL).

Yet, despite these types of exchanges he suggests research has also found that only a limited number of contributors respond to the comments of others in online debates (Dahlberg, 2000:183). Wilhelm’s (1999) study found that only 20 percent of a random sample of 50 messages, from a political newsgroup, was actually directed at a previous message. However, he argues that this is countered by Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) study in which more than 60 percent of 4,322 messages responded to previous posts (Dahlberg, 2000:183). Dahlberg (2000:183) states that despite the discrepancies between these findings, the Internet facilitates a critical exchange of views required of the public sphere conception.

Dahlberg (200:183) also argues that research has found that online contributors exchange validity claims accompanied by reasoned justification for the views presented. Katz (1997:49-50, 190-191) study found that online debate is often “buttressed by information from Web sites, published research, and archived data” which leads the way to “a more rational, less dogmatic approach to politics”. Furthermore, three out of four postings on the Internet and AOL fora studied by Wilhelm (1999:73) contained reasons for justifying assertions. Dahlberg (2000:184) claims that “It is clear that the exchange and critique or validity claims with reasons is taking place within many Internet fora. This conclusion establishes that a deliberative structure exists online”. Yet, he also argues that the deliberative quality of online debates is yet to be established (Dahlberg, 2000:184).

Constructing Debates in Cyberspace

In a study on online political deliberations, Albrecht (2006) observed that some participants did not pay attention to what other contributors had already posted, instead stringently focusing on conveying their own views. He gives the example of one contributor who posted 17 comments during the course of a debate, yet only one of these comments contained constructive elements, such as arguments to support his views or proposing solutions to the problem under discussion (Albrecht, 2006:73).

In Maria Torres Da Silva's (2013:103) study on readers' comments in newspaper websites, she observed that many comments within the forums do not offer specific reasons or arguments to support their claims. Berger (2009) argues that online comment forums (referred to as 'talkbacks') comprise dogmatic attitudes that are not open to be questioned, that is comments made without validity claims, based on "personal prejudice, emotion or aesthetic judgement" (Wilhelm, 1999:325). For comments to be regarded as valid, Jensen (2003) argues that commenters must participate in 'argumentation'.

This notion of 'argumentation' comprises three discrete values: 'external validation' applies when the debater uses information from external sources and pursues an argument based on facts and figures, 'internal validation' applies when the debater argues based on his/her own viewpoints, stands and values, but these are made explicit in the argumentation and 'allegations' applies when the debater makes claim without any kind of validation or presentation of facts (see Figure 1). The categories of internal and external validation introduce a qualitative appreciation of argumentation based on personal values made explicit being good for deliberation. Though, some would argue that 'objective' information is better (Janssen & Kies, 2005:16).

In Fuchs' (2006) study of political online debates, he found that 68.8 percent of contributors provided arguments to support their assertions. Furthermore, in Wright and

Street's (2007:863) study of online political forums, they established that 75 percent of messages provided some foundation for their assertions. Yet these researchers do not analyse the ways in which these 'validity' arguments are operationalised or the effects they have on deliberation. As Spataru et al (2004:7) note "It may seem obvious that interaction is an important component of a discussion but it is not always present in studies of online discussions". As such, validity claims must be conceived as one of the ways in which online contributors construct their comments, thus contributing toward an online public sphere as Barber (2006:6) eloquently notes "The essential democratic relationship is between citizens and citizens". In order for participants to be able to participate in these 'citizen-to-citizen' online debates, first technological, social and cultural developments needed to occur.

The Beginnings of Online Participation

Before the Internet, the public could write letters to the editor, telephone journalists or go to news offices in person to comment on news stories. Whilst the activity of giving feedback may have changed, the ethos is the same; the public having a right to express their views on news stories (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012). Yet, there is something that has not changed. Whilst these online interactive means of 'participation' have been created to 'involve' the public in news discourse, there are still limitations. Just as letters to the editor were only published on the behest of the editor, the opinions of the public still go through a process of 'filtering' (McMillen, 2013). Unlike the industry agreed regulations of the PCC for newspapers, and OFCOM for broadcast news, news providers regulate online interactive features on their websites using their own internal organisation-specific codes of practice. As such, 'moderation' is a term used on news organisations' websites, to describe a set of rules by which online commenters must abide in order to post comments³.

Whilst moderating practices for publishing 'letters to the editor' and publishing

³ E.g., If comments posted on 'Comment is Free' break 'community standards', they are replaced with 'This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our [community standards](#). Replies may also be deleted'.

comments online are quite distinct (selective choice versus mass commentary) the moderation process remains in place (Borton, 2013). Digitalisation has greatly facilitated the public to comment online conveniently, in a controlled and immediate manner, whilst being provided with the (perceived) opportunity for free expression of opinion (Human Capital, 2008). Today, online news sites offer a range of possibilities for public engagement within mainstream news websites creating reconstituted public participation in, and deliberation of, news events (Lewis & Usher, 2013; Allan, 2007). The ability of the public to post comments on news websites began with the development of new media technologies.

New Media Technology

According to Lievrouw and Livingston (2002) ‘new media’ consists of technological devices, communicative practices attached to those devices and the social contexts and institutions within which they are produced. With the development of the Internet and World Wide Web many forms of online communications software packages have been produced. These packages have allowed the ordinary citizen to create their own discussion group, forum or blog (Brady, 2005). For news providers to remain dominant over ‘alternative’ news outlets, and amateur-produced sites, many have adopted a vast array of online participatory measures (Hermida & Thurman, 2008).

The development of commercial web browsers (Netscape in 1994 and Microsoft Internet Explorer in 1995, See Scott, 2005) resulted in most print and broadcast news organisations having an online presence by 1996. This offered easy access to the web for both news outlets and private individuals alike. In 1993 the *New York Times* confidently argued that the Internet was “the first window into cyberspace”, where public access to web browsing could benefit users, providers and software developers alike. There were critics of the Internet, concerned with issues such as Neil Postman’s (1993) ‘technopoly’, where he argues that a totalitarian technocracy has formed, meaning that technology is deified over and

above everything else. However, the majority of commentary concentrated on the liberation and empowerment of individuals and the 'benefits' it had for society (Briggs & Burke, 2009).

'Liberated' and 'empowered', individuals could begin designing their own websites, weblogs, forums, discussion groups and eventually news sites through easily navigated, free software downloads (Briggs & Burke, 2009). As Hugh Mackay and Tim O'Sullivan argue new communication technologies arise in the context of existing media, and "in many ways the greatest significance of the new communication technologies lies in their impact on existing media" (1999:3-4). The Internet was designed for commerce, but became available to anyone with access; in essence, a tool for business became a tool for pleasure.

The early to mid-1990s saw the first generation of Net news, which included simple hypertext pages that redistributed their offline news work and other third-party content, whilst news media learned how to transport their reportage online (Bucy, 2004). This first generation of online news came when the days of 'old computing' were fading (Shneiderman, 2002) characterised by poor connections, poor interface design, superfluous animations and uninspiring content (see, Nielsen, 1996, 1999). Continuous updates, streaming of audio and visual material appeared, Net news became more detailed, and developed interactive chat and online discussion groups which formed new communities (Bucy, 2004). Online newspapers developed more complex forms of storytelling and print-based journalists adopted electronic data gathering techniques (Harper, 1998). This proved fruitful in interacting with sources, ensuring the emergence of the Internet as an important development for news media (Barnhurst, 2002).

The third generation of Net news sites were more advanced still where it was argued that "improved interactive applications will create an entirely new integrated news experience that will serve to engage consumers" (Brown, 2000:26) and that "the third generation of Internet news is...an opportunity to engage the next generation of news consumers in the

worlds of news and public affairs”. (ibid:780). This engagement comes in two general forms. Firstly, content-to-system-interactivity occurs when news consumers have control over the selection and presentation of editorial content, whether text, sound, visual, multimedia or a combination of these (Massey & Levy, 1999; McMillan, 2006). The second format is that of user-to-user interactivity, where person-to-person conversations are mediated by the news network (Bucy, 2004). These conversations can be synchronous or asynchronous and take the form of emails, instant messaging, chat room discussions, message boards, user boards, blogs and online forums (Bucy, 2004).

Research into *user-to-system* interactivity and *user-to-user* interactivity before 2000 ascertained that content interactivity was more prevalent than interpersonal interactivity. A study by Peng et al (1999) discovered that out of 80 online daily newspapers in 1997, nearly all of them provided hyperlinks to non-news websites and more than two thirds offered readers access to electronic archives, but only a third facilitated interactive communications either between users or between readers and editorial staff. Massey and Levy (1999) also found content features to be more prevalent than interactive features, as did Li (1998). In a second study, Li (2002) noted that whilst online newspapers had begun to diversify website content, audience access to news and information was still limited.

By the mid-2000s something had begun to change, participatory features focused on user-to-user interactivity were emerging (Boczkowski, 2004; Deuze, 2006; Bucy & Affe, 2006). More recently, Hermida & Thurman (2008) conducted a study of UK online news outlets and found that there were nine types of interactive features on all twelve of the selected news websites, which had grown substantially since Thurman’s (2008) original study conducted in 2005. Since its beginnings, online news has grown from a one-way transmission of information to a two-way communicative space yet questions remain as to

whether online interaction has increased public engagement with news and public affairs (Brown, 2000).

According to Barnhurst and Nerone (2001:2) news reporting (through newspapers in particular) “support deliberation by transmitting information to people, who in turn feedback in various ways – by their votes, of course, but also through letters to elected officials , poll results, or other political expressions”. Wring and Horrocks (2001) suggest, in the UK, the party system and continuation of party politics are only marginally affected by information and communication technologies. Schudson (1998) also questions the notion that digital technologies can transform democracy by achieving the ideal of the informed, active citizen. Whilst there may not be agreement on the positive or negative outcomes of digital technologies on politics, there has been a transformation occurring which focuses on interactivity, immediacy and resistance to mediation (Barber, 1998:3).

However, whilst the diverse range of online spaces where the public can access and consume news are infinite in Western societies some highly credible, some not, this does not guarantee access to all. The ‘digital divide’ is an expression used to demarcate the inequality of access to the Internet, both social and technological. It describes those who are too poor to afford the technology, or those in a country not developed in Internet accessibility, or those who are unable to access the Internet due to a lack of skills in its use (Epstein et al, 2011). These inequalities can then be deemed representative of a lack of political participation online (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006).

New Media and Public Culture

The promise of new information and communication technologies fostered a hope that the public would become more politically engaged. Early studies, such as Laudon (1977) highlighted major technological limitations of such new technologies, and limited access to them by the majority of the populous. Since the 1990s, with the profusion of the Internet and

greater use of Internet-enabled events, optimism about the role of new technologies in reinvigorating political participation has emerged (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006).

The Internet is seen as one means by which new technologies can broaden public political participation by organising groups and opening up new networks to communicate, thus bypassing traditional media (Dahlgren, 2005). The interactive and asynchronous capabilities of the Internet create horizontal communication among the public (e.g. individual to individual) and vertical communication among the public and political institutions (individual to public officials) top-down and bottom-up (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006).

The mass media are therefore deemed to be a forum through which public culture can be exercised (Dahlgren, 2001). The media provide information, analysis, forums for debate and a shared civic culture (or public sphere) through which politics can be experienced; in particular, through online public space (Dahlgren, 2001). As such, research regarding community and the public sphere in cyberspace has been emerging (Bohman, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002; Blumler & Coleman, 2001; Holmes, 1997; Jones, 1998; Smith & Kollock, 1999). Where Hill and Hughes (1998) discovered that for its users, the Internet was a means by which to expand the political margins of the public sphere, others have argued:

The spread of more democratic forms of government, the liberalization of media and telecommunication systems, the ensuing proliferation, popularity and interactivity of the media –all of these suggest a substantial expansion of the public sphere (Deane, 2005:179).

Yet, researchers have been optimistic and pessimistic as to the media's ability to reinvigorate the public sphere and political discourse (Barber, 1997; Barnett, 1998; Davis & Owen, 1998; Boggs & Dirmann, 1999; Coleman et al, 1999; Cubitt, 1999; Holmes, 1997). Coleman (2001: 118) argues that new media are having three effects on civic participation; firstly, they allow the public to access remote information which can help citizens engage in political discussions more informatively; secondly, they offer new spaces for unmediated public deliberation where the public can interact with one another, and with elites; and

thirdly, they are changing the way representatives carry out their work. The second effect is important here; unmediated space for public deliberation. Yet, whilst these ‘new’ spaces may increase the perception of greater public participation they have largely been controlled by mainstream media organisations (Papacharissi, 2008). Cultural and social expressions and power relationships therefore remain mediated by electronic communications (Castells, 1996; also see, Fiske, 1995; Kellner, 1995; Skovmand and Schroder, 1992; Stevenson, 1995).

Newton (2001:151) suggests that the mass media have become as powerful as the government and are no longer the “humble carriers of news” but influential players in a political game, with powers of their own. Others suggest, they repeatedly exclude, disregard or undermine some political voices (see, for example, Curran, 1991; Hollingsworth, 1986; Snoddy, 1992). Accordingly, the question of if, and how, and in what format a ‘public culture’ can be reclaimed in our digitalised electronic world is a matter of debate. Whilst Dahlgren (2003:151) argues that the media have been accused of undercutting “the kind of public culture needed for a healthy democracy”, others argue that new technologies such as the Internet acts as an intermediary between private and public, enhancing the capability of public deliberation and a deliberative democracy (Bentivegna, 2002).

Democracy requires a public culture and the mass media can provide a forum through which that public culture can be exercised (Dalhgren, 2001). However, Sassi (2001: 102) speculates that “the Net as a political public sphere is hardly considered by the greater public, and, as the medium is subject to increased commercialisation and attempts at regulation by private and public bureaucracies, the prospect may be remote for some time to come”. Regardless of this assertion, the media realm has been expanding at a rapid rate in contemporary society, and with it a corresponding enlargement of the public sphere. If the public sphere is designed to encourage and facilitate understanding in everyday life, the social and cultural spheres are the essential basis for such engagements.

Digitalisation has changed the relationship between media and politics (Davis, 2002). These relationships are shaped not only by what is communicated, but also how it is communicated, “in all forms of mediated communication the means of communication shape the communication itself and the manner in which it is experienced” (Axford, 2001: 21). That manner of experience has been transforming the public’s relationship with politics, so much so that John Street (2001) argues; politics should be understood as a form of popular culture which is now transmitted through mass (new and remediated) media forms.

As a public sphere, the Internet is a tool through which people can express their views and debate common matters, which in turn, shifts politics toward a more discursive form. Consequently, as Sassi (2001: 103) notes “Net discussions and formal political procedures should be established and new democratic forms created that can address the complex transformations of late modern society”. Some scholars go further, suggesting that “In the wired world, individuals can now make their choices as to which authorities and information sources they will accept...leading to a greater democratisation of knowledge, empowerment of the individual and the potential for more informed interactions between the citizenry and organisations” (Riley, 2000:67). Yet others continue to contest the need for regulation as without it e-democracy would be forfeit to “the most obsessive loquacious posters” (Blumler & Coleman, 2001:17-18). It is apparent that regulations are key themes in debates concerning online deliberative speech spaces, with much debate focused on issues concerning online interactions largely existing within rule-bound deliberative spaces (Wright, 2006).

‘Free Speech’ and Internet ‘Regulation’

Whilst advocates of free speech rely on the First Amendment Bill of Rights in America⁴, communicative acts in any country with access to the Internet are usually bound by

⁴ The Bill of Rights, First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances”. Accessed 24.9.11 at: http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill_of_rights_transcript.html

certain national speech restrictions (Cooper, 2008). Such areas include libel (defamation of character applies on and offline), pornography online⁵, subversive information (used to coordinate anti-government violence), hate speech (used to incite violence and hate crimes against certain groups) (Mayer-Schonberger & Foster, 1997) and privacy protection (the EU has recently implemented regulations to protect the flow of information about individuals to prevent corporate intrusion upon individual privacy) (Swire & Litan, 1998).

Furthermore, Mayer-Schonberger and Foster (1997: 22) argue that even Western democracies consistently restrict freedom of expression, and note that,

The Net is not an anarchic, unregulated dominion above and beyond individual state control, but rather a terrain policed by varied, numerous, and often contradictory national laws that create a variety of regulatory fiefdoms. Yet, the internationality of the Net...invariably shapes all communicative activity on it as a whole. Thus, the international aspect of the Net does not remove discussions on the Net from national regulations, but instead subjects them to panoply of varying and contradictory regulations that breed uncertainty. The consequence is that speech, subjected to a patchwork of constraints, might be restricted more than is intended or necessary.

As such, Mayer-Schonberger and Foster (1997) highlight the need for freedom of expression but within the confines of regulated speech space, suggesting that there should be clearly set down parameters for online content restriction to the common denominator among the community of nations. They suggest that together, these substantive categories of speech must be regulated and agreed upon followed by a working enforcement strategy. Whilst these suggestions are well argued, there are no such global parameters in place as yet.

Palfrey (2010) argues that there have been four phases of Internet regulation: 'open internet', 'access denied', 'access controlled' and 'access contested'. These different phases relate to specific time periods. The 'open internet' phase occurred between the 1960s and 2000. The term emphasizes the descriptive, predictive and normative meanings applicable to the Internet at that time. The notion of the 'open Internet' is still relevant today considering that there are far more opportunities to speak and hear the voices of others than ever before.

⁵ See the Obscene Publications Act for UK guidelines

It is not only states that have benefitted from this technological advancement, individuals and groups have also benefitted from these mediated technologies offering greater personal autonomy in the wider public sphere (Benkler, 2006). Individuals have access to information (those with access to the Internet and the skills to use it) that is unprecedented; individuals can access books, journals, articles, newspapers and more online, more specifically they have access to knowledge (Benkler, 2006). The Internet has the power to form collective action, which is an important characteristic for democratisation. Internet technologies and digital media can also enhance the formation and power of certain groups which can be used positively (Witt, 2004), but also negatively as when *Facebook* was alleged to have been used to co-ordinate the violence and riots that took place in Britain during August 2011. Whilst this was a negative outcome, it demonstrates that the internet can be used to form public action through online communities.

Palfrey's (2010) next phase of Internet regulation is that of 'access denied' from 2000 to 2005. During this period, governments and others began to consider that the activities and expression of persons on the Web needed to be more stringently regulated. The initial reactions of States such as China and Saudi Arabia were the most extreme, blocking or filtering the access to some information on the Internet. Even today, access to the Internet for Chinese citizens is still markedly restricted in relation to international content⁶. Whilst cyberspace may appear to be borderless, there are restrictions in place related to particular real-world geographical areas (Deibert et al, 2010). Research undertaken by the OpenNet Initiative (2010)⁷ compared the Internet filtering practices of a series of states in a systematic, methodological manner over an eight year period. The research includes over seventy states, two hundred and eighty-nine Internet service providers and over 100,000 web sites. The

⁶ See, 'Internet Censorship in China', (2010) *New York Times Online*, accessed 27.09.11 at: http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/news/international/countriesandterritories/china/internet_censorship/index.html

⁷ A collaborative project undertaken by The Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto; the Berkman Centre for Internet and Society at Harvard University and the SecDev Group (2010)

focus on the project was the Middle East, North Africa, Asia and Central Asia as these are the areas where the greatest level of restriction occurs. However, North America and Western Europe were also included where forms of speech regulation, rather than Internet filtering, are usual practices.

Internet filtering varies widely from country to country, and ranges from social, religious or politically' oriented blockages by the state. Web filtering was also found to be inconsistent as web content is constantly changing. Mobile devices and social media were also found to complicate speech regulation online (OpenNet Initiative, 2010). It would be easy to suggest that democratic states do not regulate the Internet as much as authoritarian states, but this would be a falsehood. Whilst the focus of the filtering may be different, China blocking much of the content produced in the rest of the world (Kissel, 2007), and America blocking what children see in libraries and schools to protect them from harm (Rodden, 2002), the means by which it is done are markedly similar. In some instances, all information relating to a particular area are blocked (such as all blogs on *WordPress* being blocked in Turkey (Akdeniz et al, 2008) and all usage of *Facebook* in Pakistan (Helft, 2010) when only 'offenders' could be targeted and blocked. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia made Internet filtering a pre-requisite before allowing public access to the Internet (Deibert, 2008).

Whilst it is undeniable that some technically skilled individuals can overcome state restrictions to the Internet, the majority cannot (Deibert, 2008). As such, there is a proverbial game of cat and mouse between individual code breakers and the state; however some (such as Saudi Arabia) acknowledge that breaches of restrictions are inevitable. A minority of states (China being at the forefront) have demonstrated that through investing in technical, financial and human intervention, states can control what citizens access online, and can erect 'digital gates' in cyberspace that act as a border between their state and the rest of the world (Lessig 2006; Goldsmith and Wu 2006: 65 - 86).

Palfrey's (2010) third stage of regulation is 'access controlled' which he suggests occurred between 2005 and 2010. This stage encompasses the ways in which different states have tried to regulate the Internet using filters and blockages, but also as a means of using them to maintain control over access to cyberspace (Deibert et al, 2010). The controls in this phase are less obvious than those utilised during the filtering and blocking stage on Internet regulation. These 'new' controls are more adaptable and can be adjusted according to changing cultural and political movements, as in 2009 when China blocked content during the anniversary of Tiananmen Square (Palfrey, 2010).

Palfrey's (2010) fourth stage of regulation 'access contested' applies from 2010 in which he argues that there is ongoing political contestation between users and States in how Internet regulation is implemented globally. He argues that with the growing centrality of Internet activities online, users are becoming more vocal in their disagreement with interference in their activities, particularly State interference. As such, questions concerning regulation of the Internet are ongoing, though there are significant variations as to the level of regulation and censorship both locally and globally (Palfrey, 2010).

Online News Regulation

Whilst most newspapers set out their 'editorial values' (these 'values' are usually those agreed upon, and regulated therein, by the Press Complaints Commission's Codes of Practice⁸) and television channels are regulated by the Office of Communications⁹ (although the *BBC* is regulated by OFCOM, the *BBC* Trust¹⁰ ensures the 'public service' aspect of *BBC* broadcasting is maintained, and often the first point of call for complaints concerning *BBC* broadcasts). Unlike newspapers and television news, the Internet does not have an independent body to regulate it. As such mainstream newspapers and television news

⁸ See the Press Complaints Commission website: <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html>, accessed 19.08.11

⁹ See OFCOM: <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/broadcasting/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/>, accessed 19.08.11

¹⁰ See OFCOM website for the 'Memorandum of Understanding Between OFCOM and the BBC Trust': <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/about/how-ofcom-is-run/committees/ofcom-bbc-joint-steering-group/memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-office-of-communications-ofcom-and-the-bbc-trust/>, accessed 19.08.11

broadcasters' websites are 'regulated' as to their online content (online articles still fall under PCC Editorial Guidelines and the BBC News Online still falls under the BBC Trust and OFCOM), much Internet news is only 'regulated' within the context of what that particular news website deem appropriate for their particular brand of news coverage.

As such, whilst independent Internet regulation does not currently exist in online comment forums, news providers implement their own set of regulations in the form of 'house-rules' in conjunction with 'moderation' practices. To understand the relationship between news provider and commenter, it is necessary to understand not only the potential effects of political influences on news providers' articles forums, but also how restrictions to access such as moderation are key constituents of understanding participation in online debates. Consequently, the political affiliation of the three news providers who are the focus of this study are outlined below, along with the 'house-rules' and moderation practices of each of the sites. This will clarify the potential for political influence on, and restrictions to, participation that commenters encounter within the forums.

World Have Your Say, RightMinds and Comment is Free¹¹: A Comparative Overview

Newspapers in the UK are generally classified as 'tabloid' or 'quality', and both have increased numbers of participatory measures on their websites (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). However, this reconfiguration is not unique to mainstream newspapers; television news providers such as the *BBC* have also developed participatory elements on their websites including blogs, comments sections and polls (see Macdonald, 2007). Research has shown that mainstream television news organisations, such as the *BBC*, remain a dominant source of news for the UK general public (BARB, 2011). However, whilst the online presence of television news providers has grown substantially over the last decade, they still cannot

¹¹ The rationale, sampling strategy and methodological process for choosing these three news providers is explained in Chapter 2.

challenge the overall popularity of newspaper websites (*Press Gazette*, 2011)¹². While *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* are organised through a complex system of message boards, blogs and forums, website material within *World Have Your Say* is largely produced by the *BBC* resulting in more of a collective monologue than a forum interactively produced by contributors. As a result, the analysis of online comments in this chapter largely involves *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* where evidence of ‘autonomy’ and ‘discursive inclusion and equality’ is in evidence.

Political Bias in *World Have Your Say*

In considering Dahlberg’s conception of ‘autonomy’ as freedom from State and commercial interests, the *BBC* presents itself as a problem. It is a state-funded broadcaster and as such the strength of ‘autonomy’ in such as space may be severely hindered by this connection (Ellman & Germano, 2008). However, the renewal of the Royal Charter in 2005, and the accompanying Agreement guaranteeing the editorial independence of the *BBC*, should be a positive indicator as to the *BBC*’s political impartiality (*BBC Trust*, 2005). However, the *BBC* have been accused of biased reporting concerning events in the Middle East (Gaber et al, 2009) and a having a pro-EU stance (Aitken, 2013) both of which are in evidence within *WHYS* articles.

Moderation within *World Have Your Say*

Whilst *WHYS* offers a forum in which individuals can post their opinions, there are a great many restrictions to active participation. Within the context of the forum itself, the ‘managed’ structure of the forum (Coleman, 2008) and stringent moderation practices can affect the inclusion and equality of contributions. Commenters do not have the opportunity to participate in back-and-forth discussions on the general topic raised. As such, commenters

¹² The *BBC* was the top-rated news website in May 2011, the other nine places comprising six newspapers, and three online news sites. (see: ‘Top 40 News Websites List Puts BBC Top’, *Press Gazette*, accessed 07.07.2011) <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=47363>

cannot include, and question, any assertions made within the forums resulting in the formation of a barrier to the inclusivity and equality of contributors' views.

There are also restrictions concerning access to the forum and the possibility of comments not being posted. In order to post comments, users must provide a verifiable email address, password and choose a 'display name'; this can be a pseudonym, including 'anonymous'¹³. Commenters must confirm their age as under sixteen's need the permission of a parent or guardian to post comments in certain areas of *BBC* webpages¹⁴ and they must agree to abide by the 'house-rules' of the forum, which offers guidelines as to what is considered 'acceptable' to be posted¹⁵.

The *WHYS* 'house-rules' focus on several key areas: comment content should remain within the law; be polite and respectful of others; be short and engaging, be relevant; not be used for promotion or commercial purposes; commenters should not hold multiple memberships; should not impersonate others; should not abuse the complaints system; and should not post illegal material¹⁶. The key elements promoted by *WHYS* are relevance, respect and short, engaging comments which contribute toward the discussion (*BBC*, 2014). Violation of any of these 'rules' may lead to temporary suspension or termination of membership to the site, and the *BBC* 'reserves the right to delete any posting, at any time, for any reason, and is under no obligation to publish any work submitted' (*BBC*, 2014).

What is not made clear here is the level of moderation within *WHYS*, which can affect the likelihood of comments being equally included within the forum¹⁷. Within the present data, articles posted within the *WHYS* forum were mainly 'pre-moderated' rather than

¹³ Problems arising from 'anonymous' posts will be addressed later on in the chapter

¹⁴ See BBC rules concerning registration, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/id/info/registration> accessed 13.10.14

¹⁵ I could not gain access to any *BBC WHYS* internal guidance on how to apply these 'rules' to comments, and interpretation is subjective; what may seem to contravene the rules to one person may not be true for another.

¹⁶ For full list of 'The Have Your Say Rules', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/help/4176520.stm> accessed 14.06.14

¹⁷ See 'Moderation Explained' <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/help/4180404.stm> accessed 15.06.14

‘reactively-moderated’¹⁸. This means that the majority of comments were read before being published, with only a small number of registered members’ comments being posted immediately to the forum. All posted comments are then monitored by a moderator and comments can still be removed if they are deemed to contravene the ‘house-rules’, or if someone complains about a comment.

What is particularly interesting about *WHYS* is their admission that not all comments will be posted on the forum. They stipulate that: ‘Due to the large volume of comments that we receive, we cannot guarantee that all comments submitted will be published on the site, but we try our best to publish as many as we can’ (*BBC WHYS* FAQs, 2014). And in relation to the moderation process: ‘We currently moderate about half of the comments we receive. If you have not registered, or a debate is fully moderated, we have to read all comments to make sure that they have not broken any house rules before they are published’. (*BBC WHYS* FAQs, 2014).

Whilst moderators may apply the same set of rules to each comment prior to publication, not all comments will be published. Whilst complaints from commenters regarding the removal of comments are not present within the forums, the lack of timely publication of views is in evidence, and creates a strong sense of frustration:

What is the point of HYS if *WHYS* can't...manage to "moderate" posts for days...on end? Honestly, how much time or effort can it possibly take?...C'mon guys. This cannot be so difficult. (Comment 11, *WHYS*10).

From the present data, there are only two examples in which comments were visibly ‘removed’ from the forums, and appear to have been removed ‘reactively’, that is being published and later removed with a marker left in its place: “This comment was removed because the moderators found it broke the house rules” (Comment 4, *WHYS*7). Within the scope of the present study, the reasons for the removal of these comments are not known, and

¹⁸ ‘Pre-moderated’ comments must be viewed by a moderator before posting online. ‘Reactively-moderated’ comments are posted online and can then subsequently be removed if they are found to breach the ‘house-rules’ or if they are complained about

we cannot ascertain whether other comments have been removed from the same or other forums. As such, analysis of the full extent of moderation practices cannot be undertaken.

The structure of the *WHYS* forum is not designed for commenters to respond to one another. As such, they are structural precluded from being ‘debates’. Rather, they are postings that are generally framed into monologic postings. As such, whilst commenters may be equally entitled to introduce and question any assertion made by article authors/radio show guests, they cannot do so in relation to other commenters’ views. Moderation practices within *WHYS* appear to be relatively invisible within the forum, most likely due to pre-moderation. Whilst all comments may be considered for publication against the same set of criteria, this process results in some comments not being published. Furthermore, Moderators make clear that some comments that ‘pass’ the moderation process will also not be published. This would appear to negatively affect the inclusive and equal opportunity of all commenters having their views heard within the forum.

Political Bias in *RightMinds*

In contrast to the *BBC*, the *Daily Mail* is widely recognised as forging an explicitly right wing bias and moralistic undertones on a range of issues including anti-immigration, dislike of the Labour Party, the European Union, and the *BBC* (Meyer, 2010). The newspaper is also considered very conservative in its support for traditional family values, the Monarchy, the Conservative Party, and law and order initiatives (Meyer, 2010). Where the *BBC* and consequently *World Have Your Say* are funded by the license payer, the *Daily Mail* is a commercial enterprise owned by DMG Media.

The Daily Mail’s commercial roots lead to some commentators arguing that “it allegedly panders to the lowest common denominator of public taste, it simplifies, it personalises, it thrives on sensation and scandal” (Ornebring & Jonsson, 2004: 28) in which pre-set ideologies and commercial influences affect newspaper content. However, other

commentators disagree, such as Hartley (2013: 48) who accepts that whilst there is a strong relationship between news and capital, he rejects the idea that news media inevitably reproduce the ideas and ideologies of those that own them, or of powerful individuals in the commercial world at large.

Moderation within *RightMinds*

The structure of *RightMinds* forums appears to be both inclusive and dialogic as compared with the *WHYS* forums allowing contributors to include and question any assertion made within the context of the forums. However, there are a number of rules commenters must adhere to in order to post comments. Commenters must first register with the site using a verifiable email address, and provide a username for their online profile (Registration, *Mail Online*, 2014). There are also number of ‘house-rules’ which commenters must follow, with the *Mail Online* (2014) requesting that commenters “respect the spirit and tone of these rules and the community”.

These ‘house-rules’ can be summarised as follows: commenters’ contributions should include reasons for assertions; they should be comprehensible; they should not contain swearing, crude or sexual language¹⁹; they should be respectful; they should not discuss the non-appearance of content, removed content, or the suspension or termination of any users; they should not abuse the complaints system; they should not contain private or confidential information; they should not impersonate others; they should disclose personal links to the topic under consideration; they must avoid libellous comments²⁰; and they must not use the site for advertising, solicitation or investigations or any commercial purposes (*Mail Online*,

¹⁹ Much research has been undertaken as to what kinds of words equate to ‘swearing’, the kinds of persons who use it, and contexts in which it occur (See Eble, 1996; Potts, 2007; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008) whilst most concur that “The ultimate offensiveness of words is determined entirely by pragmatic variables such as speaker-listener relationship and social-physical setting, as well as the words used and tone of voice” Jay (2009:154).

²⁰ ‘Libellous comments’ contain ‘defamatory, false or misleading information; are insulting, threatening or abusive, obscene or of sexual nature, offensive, racist, sexist, homophobic or discriminatory against religions or other groups’, *Mail Online Rules*, Rule 5. No Libel or Other abuse, <http://boards.dailymail.co.uk/misc.php?do=showrules> accessed 15.06.14

2014). Further to these ‘rules’, additional information is made available concerning the processes of making comments, and for their removal via moderation.

Registered commenters can post an unlimited number of comments across the *Mail Online*; however, users cannot post more than 10 comments on the same article in any twenty-four hour period (*Mail Online*, 2014). Any comment that breaches the ‘house-rules’ or the Terms of use, may be removed, or unpublished; comments that have been removed must not be resubmitted; responses to such comments will also be removed or in some circumstances, all comments will be removed from the forum (*Mail Online*, 2014). Failure to comply with these rules will lead to suspension or banning from posting further comments²¹ (*Mail Online*, 2014).

All of these ‘rules’ are underscored by the moderation practices of the *RightMinds* forums. Within the present data, nine forums were ‘pre-moderated’ meaning that all comments had to be approved by a moderator before publication. The remaining fifteen were ‘reactively-moderated’ meaning that comments are published directly to the forum, but can later be removed by moderators should they be found to contravene the ‘house-rules’ or if they receive complaints. As with other research (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011a; Thurman, 2006) the forums that were pre-moderated include those relating to crime, welfare and racism. It was not possible to ascertain how many comments remained unpublished, or were removed from the forums as no marker is left in its place to indicate such actions.

The only evidence of moderation taking place is in the following post by Jack (2012) whose previous comment has been edited prior to publication, though it was posted in a ‘reactively-moderated’ forum: “George from Durham.... I see that my post has been edited”. (Comment 166, RM19). As such, comments submitted to ‘reactively’ moderated forums are also subject to moderation practices though they are largely invisible to contributors. This

²¹ For full list of *RightMinds* ‘house-rules’ see <http://boards.dailymail.co.uk/misc.php?do=showrules> accessed 14.06.14

type of ‘silent moderation’ can lead to a conspiratorial atmosphere when comments are removed, or in this case altered, without explanation (Coleman et al 2002).

However, within the present data, comments are compared to the same set of criteria, in both pre and post-moderated forums, leaving the forums best described as ‘managed’ (Coleman, 2008). This means that there are tight controls regarding participation, particularly that of moderation, both visible and invisible, including non-publication or editing of comments. Whilst pre-moderation can ensure that messages are kept relevant to the topic under discussion and can help to maintain a respectful atmosphere, it can also have negative implications not only for the equality of contributors’ views but also for their views to be published inclusively without alteration²² (Wright & Street, 2007).

Dahlberg (2001a) emphasises equality of participation in online debates, though he is sceptical that such equality exists. As every post submitted to the forum is not guaranteed to be published, it limits the possibilities of every commenter having equal opportunity to include, or question, any assertion made within the forums, casting representativeness of published views into doubt (Fisher et al, 2006). Moderators have a great deal of power when deciding what comments are included on forums, and to remove or alter comments prior to publication, which impacts upon the equality of participation. It is therefore difficult to quantify whether, or to what extent, exclusion and inequality pervades the *RightMinds* forums due to moderation, though one can raise significant doubts as to the inclusiveness and equality of all contributors’ posts.

²² ‘Inclusiveness’ and ‘inclusivity’ need to be distinguished as two separate criteria. According to Dahlberg (2001a) ‘inclusiveness’ refers to the process by which *all* manner of comments and perspectives should be equally included within online debate. ‘Inclusivity’ refers to issues such as gender; ethnicity and socio-economic status, which can affect a person’s access to online participation (see Albrecht, 2006).

Political Bias in *Comment is Free*

Whilst the *Daily Mail* has right-wing leanings, the *Guardian* is earmarked as being biased to the left²³ along with its readership (Ipsos Mori, 2010). According to Anderson and McLaren (2012: 831) “Media owners have political motives as well as profit motives, and can influence public opinion by withholding information that is pejorative to their political agenda—provided that their agenda is not too far from the political mainstream”. Yet, political bias is not the only issue, advertisers may also affect the choice of news stories published to create an atmosphere conducive to attracting the highest degree of potential sales (Ellman & Germano, 2008).

However, (Tunstall 1996:14) notes that the *Guardian*’s economic base is different to the *Daily Mail*’s, and suggests that “upmarket papers are primarily in the advertising business while down market papers are primarily in the sales business”. This means that the commercial side of the *Guardian* is less likely to influence commenters in *Comment is Free*, than those exerted upon commenters in the *Daily Mail*’s *RightMinds*. Furthermore, although the *Guardian* is a commercial newspaper, it is owned by the Scott Trust and is therefore “immune from the necessity of maximising share prices or dividends” (McNair, 2011:125).

The potential effects of political bias are similar in the *Guardian* as to the *Daily Mail*. Yet where the *Daily Mail* is considered a ‘popular’ newspaper, the *Guardian* is described as a ‘quality’ newspaper (Coleman, Steibel & Blumler, 2011). Under the ownership of the Scott Trust, the objective of the newspaper is “to sustain journalism that is free from commercial or political interference” in which “the voice of opponents no less than that of friends has a right to be heard”, with a focus on “honesty, integrity, courage, fairness and a sense of duty to reader and community” (*Guardian* Media Group, 2014).

²³ See Geddes & Tonge (2002) *Labour’s Second Landslide: The British General Election 2001*; ‘The political affiliations of the UK’s national newspapers have shifted, but there is again a heavy Tory predominance’, Stuart Wilks-Heeg, Andrew Blick, & Stephen Crone, (2012) <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/archives/38622>, accessed 28.05.14

Moderation within *Comment is Free*

Comment is Free forums are structured to allow back-and-forth exchanges of views between contributors which means that all contributors should have equal opportunity to include and question any assertion made within the forums. Yet, as seen with both *WHYS* and *RightMinds*, there are restrictions relating to access and comment removal. Individuals who wish to contribute must first register with the *Guardian* website. Registration requires a username, password, a verifiable email address and agreement to the ‘terms of use’, along with agreeing to abide by the ‘community standards’. (*The Guardian*, 2014).

There are ten specific standards which can be summarised as follows: no personal attacks on authors, other users or individuals; no persistent misrepresentation of the *Guardian* or its authors; no offensive or threatening comments; no flame wars, ingrained partisanship or generalisations; no abusive comments including racism, sexism, homophobia or other sorts of hate-speech; no comments that put the *Guardian* in legal jeopardy; no commercial or spam content; no irrelevant content; no discussing removed comments on the threads and report problems within community forums (*The Guardian*, 2014). *The Guardian* (2014) suggests:

- i. If you **act with maturity and consideration** for other users, you should have no problems.
- ii. **Don't be unpleasant.** Demonstrate and share the intelligence, wisdom and humour we know you possess.
- iii. **Take some responsibility for the quality of the conversations in which you're participating.** Help make this an intelligent place for discussion and it will be. (*The Guardian*, 2014, original emphasis).

In addition to the guidelines for participating in the forums, *The Guardian* also clearly sets out its moderation policy and consequences of violation of the ‘community standards’, which includes comments being removed from articles and blog posts – *The Guardian* will not edit user posts, if only part of a comment contravenes the community standards the whole comment will be removed (*The Guardian*, 2014). Also if subsequent posts refer to, or quote,

the removed comment they will also be removed. With regard to the level of moderation on the site, the *Guardian* (2014) stipulates that:

All community interaction is subject to some level of moderation, in order to ensure the spirit of the community standards is upheld. In general, we post-moderate community interaction, which keeps the conversation lively. However...the sheer quantity involved this...means we can't guarantee all comments live on the site are appropriate or in the spirit of the community standards (*The Guardian*, 2014).

They reserve the right to implement any measures they deem appropriate that will benefit community participants, and all decisions by moderators are final (*The Guardian*, 2014). The *Guardian* also relies on its contributors to report any comment that has not been identified as abusive, offensive or otherwise inappropriate by the moderators stating that: “The aim of moderation is not censorship, but ensuring that the community participation areas of the site remain appropriate, intelligent and lawful” (*The Guardian*, 2014).

Comments are reactively-moderated meaning that all comments are posted before being reviewed by moderators. Unlike *RightMinds*, when a comment is removed from *Comment is Free* forums, an automatically generated marker is left in its place. The only exceptions are when moderators remove multiple posts, spam, and sometimes when a comment is removed and it is necessary to delete subsequent posts. *The Guardian* “reserves the right to remove any comments at any time” (*The Guardian*, 2014). Within the present data, only 311 out of 7,238 comments were removed by a moderator and marked in this way (Appendix A). Despite the reasons for moderation being clearly stipulated, the removal of comments from the forums causes frustration to some commenters:

SinnAonaichte, Extract 1:

I've looked back at my comment history and noticed that a few have been removed by moderators even though I've not posted nothing offensive. It's made me realise that it's time to bow out as I'm farting against the thunder by participating in this topic. Comment is free...Don't make me laugh. (Comment 341²⁴).

Whilst others appear to accept there is a need for ‘community standards’:

²⁴ ‘The Myth of Race’, Deborah Ore, *Comment is Free*, 05.05.2011

I instantly regret my comment above. Comment withdrawn. Apologies (Comment 392²⁵).

In the main, moderation is visible to contributors, and whilst moderation can be frustrating, as with Ruiz et al's (2011) study including *Guardian.co.uk*, it does not appear to significantly affect the flow of debate.

Comments posted within the *Comment is Free* forums are largely published without review by moderators. This process of limited restrictions on comment content allows contributors a degree of 'autonomy' in deciding the agenda for their posts and to allow transgressive discussions to develop (Coleman, 2008). When moderators review comments and they are deemed to contravene the 'house rules' or are complained about, the content of that comment is measured against what appears to be an objective set of comment criteria. Should comments fail the criteria, they are removed from the forums.

It is Dahlberg's (2006) contention that all contributors to online debates should have equal opportunity to include, or question, any assertion made within those debates. The 'community standards' can be deemed to encourage commenters to participate in 'mature', 'considerate' discussions in which their 'intelligence', 'wisdom' and 'humour' should be used to engage in 'quality' discussions (*The Guardian*, 2014). Due to the low level of comment removal within the forums, it can be argued that contributors to *Comment Is Free* forums largely comply with this request. As such, the moderation practices of *Comment Is Free* cannot be deemed to limit the likelihood of all contributors having an equal opportunity for their comments to be included within the forums.

Studies Analysing Political Participation and the Internet

Whilst Habermas' (1989) concept of 'the public sphere'²⁶ may still be relevant to debates surrounding public deliberations today, the emergence of the Internet, the Web and

²⁵ 'The Problem with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood is not Sharia', Sara Korshid, *Comment is Free*, 21.01.2012

digitalisation has changed the terrain in which it operates. Yet, these changes do not result purely from technological advancements, as Dahlberg (2001: 615) concludes from his study “the expansion of the public sphere through the Internet requires not only developing deliberative spaces but also attracting participation from citizens who have been socialized within a commercialized and individualized culture hostile towards public deliberation”. Some scholars have criticised news organisations’ provision of online speech space, suggesting they are more interested in controlling and directing speech space than fostering democratic participation (Lowrey, 2006) , whilst others have argued that online public engagement will foster ‘democratic deliberation’ (Burgess et al, 2007; Rummens, 2011).

Against Habermas’ (1989: 247-8) assertion that the public sphere has ‘collapsed’, others believe it has been reinvigorated via the Internet. Brandenburg (2003: 4) notes ‘Cyber-enthusiasts quickly embraced Habermas’ notion of the public sphere and the theory of deliberative democracy and began to claim that the Internet provides just that: a virtual public sphere’. Therefore, debates on the public sphere are not consigned to academia; they also take place within public discussions online. The key debates concerning the online public sphere revolve around issues such as power, freedom of expression and censorship. Goodin (2000) argues that in order for public deliberation to work, it has to be done without restricting the input of the public. In order to be able to speak, the public requires a forum through which they can be heard.

The Internet provides an array of ways in which political information can be presented; blogs, online news sites and interactive media offer more specific in-depth analyses over issues of public concern. This type of interaction is often directed toward the youth in society; their use of mobile telephones and the Internet are seen as offering a door into the world of political debate (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006). However, research suggests

²⁶ Habermas (1989: 136) the ‘public sphere’ is a place in social life where something approaching public opinion can be formed, where citizens are guaranteed access, unrestricted freedom to express and publish opinion, and who create a portion of the public sphere through conversation between private individuals who form a public body.

that despite this ‘open door’ to greater participation, there has been very little change in the levels of engagement²⁷.

Di Gennaro and Dutton’s (2006) study identifies two opposing views concerning the effects of the Internet on political participation; those who view the Internet as something that can facilitate direct political participation and those who do not. The arguments for the Internet’s capacity to engage citizens in politics focus on the public being able to voice their concerns in a direct yet traditional way (such as through party websites or organising civic action online) and that this will give the public a sense of empowerment, increasing public perception of their influence on government and as a result, increasing participation in politics. Arguments against focus on research which indicate that there is no discernible evidence that the Internet is transforming political participation, and further research will offer a clearer understanding of political participation in the online sphere (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006).

In their study, Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006) used the 2005 Oxford Internet Survey to analyse political participation through the Internet. They conclude that online participation of Britons in politics is limited compared to participation offline. They identified that online political participation reinforced, and in some cases exacerbated, social inequalities in the offline political arena). This was achieved by marginalising the less educated and less wealthy members of society, in lieu of increasing involvement of those already active in the offline political sphere. They also identified that Internet proficiency is a key factor in online political participation; without the right skills, many could not engage in political issues. However, the researchers suggest that the greater the proficiency in Internet use, regardless of age, socioeconomic group or political orientation, the greater the number of individuals who will engage with politics online (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006).

²⁷ See, W.H. Dutton, (1999) Digital Democracy: Electronic Access to Politics and Services in *Society on the Line*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 173–94 for an overview of research on the Internet and politics.

There have been various forms of public deliberation models which have resulted in thousands of local and national deliberative forums on hundreds of issues, ranging from economics to social reform (Jacobs et al, 2000). Chambers (2003: 307) contends that ‘It is now commonplace to talk about the deliberative turn in democratic theory...Indeed, this turn is so striking that it has spawned a small industry of review articles and edited volumes attempting to sum up its meaning and content’. As such, public deliberation needs to be set within the context of other forms of discursive participation, whilst distinguishing it from the many ways in which the public can voice their individual and collective opinions on public issues (Delli Carpini et al, 2004).

The notion of public deliberation spawns from democratic deliberative theory. Chambers (2003: 308) summarises democratic deliberative theory as “a turning away from liberal individualist or economic understandings of democracy and toward a view anchored in conceptions of accountability and discussion”, and that “deliberative democracy focuses on the communicative processes of opinion and will formation” and is considered to be “an expansion of representative democracy”. However, this is just one interpretation of how public deliberation is the process through which deliberative democracy occurs.

There is no clear consensus on the issue. Gastil (2002: 22) considers public deliberation to entail “discussion that involves judicious argument, critical listening, and earnest decision making”. The ideal of public participation usually refers to the process through which individuals and groups participate in direct communicative exchanges, however, some also argue that surveys and the thought processes of individuals can also constitute public deliberation, as Gunderson (1995:199) notes, “Democratic deliberation occurs anytime a citizen either actively justifies her views...or defends them against a challenge”. Furthermore, research on other forms of public dialogue, such as telephoning

into a television show or contacting a public official, can also be regarded as public deliberative practices (Delli Carpini et al, 2004).

Delli Carpini et al (2004) suggest that discursive participation should revolve around discourse with other citizens through dialogue (talking, discussing, debating, deliberating), and that this kind of discourse must involve participation through speech rather than action. Research should focus on talking in public with other citizens where individuals may express their views, learn about what others think, to develop and express ideas and arguments and to understand and reach a judgement on matters of public concern. These exchanges help to clarify material interests and moral values, but also to debate issues of disagreement exacerbated by the reduction in the numbers of citizens taking part in electoral and legislative politics (Benhabib 1992, 1996; Dryzek 1990; Elster 1998; Etzioni 1997; Gutmann & Thompson 1996; Habermas 1989; Michelman 1988).

They also suggest that discursive participation is not limited to official institutions or practices involved in civic and political life. Instead, private individuals who engage in informal, unplanned exchanges, who convene for public purposes outside of government operations (such as in schools or community centres) and those who participate in public debates such as town hall meetings involving elected MPs and their constituents, are all involved in discursive participatory practices. Furthermore, they argue that discursive participation can be undertaken in various formats such as face-to-face conversations, telephone conversations, emails and through Internet forums, and that the subject of deliberative participation must revolve around local, national or international issues of public concern (Delli Carpini et al, 2004:318-19).

Supporters of deliberative theory suggest that deliberation can change minds and transform opinions; however, there are doubts about its practicality, political significance and whether it has a place in democracy at all (Price et al, 2003:5; see also see also Brown 2000,

Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002a, Mansbridge 1983, Mutz 2002, Sanders 1997, Schudson 1997, Sunstein 2001). As such, the positive optimism of proponents of public deliberation has a strong countering argument centred on the infrequent, unrepresentative and unconsciously biased practices of the public. This means that critics of deliberative democracy consider that the views of the public are disconnected from actual politics, and decision making, and that a deliberative democracy where public opinion can be accurately determined cannot exist (Delli Carpini et al, 2004).

Yet, research undertaken by Cook et al (2003) and Delli Carpini et al (2003) involved a national survey which included six measures of discursive participation. Their survey results showed that 4% of adults had participated in an online discussion which centred on a local, national or international issue; 24% had participated in an internet or instant message conversation about such issues a few times a month; 25% had attended an informal or formal discussion of the issue; 31% tried to persuade someone to vote; 47% had attempted to convince someone to change their opinion on a public issue, and 68% had face-to-face or telephone conversations on public issues a few times a month (Delli-Carpini et al 2004:323). However, 19% had not engaged in any kind of discursive participation, and only 1% had engaged in all six, with 58% participating in at least two or more, and 36% of three or more (Delli-Carpini et al, 2004:324). These survey-based findings may not meet the requirements of democratic theory; however, they do demonstrate that the public do talk about public issues on a regular basis.

These discussions highlight the difficulties espoused by minority and majority public opinion, which are deemed to skew real representation of public views (see, Nemeth 1986, Nemeth & Kwan 1985, Turner 1991), or to seek out and understand new information (Nemeth & Mayseless 1987, Nemeth & Rogers 1996), or to appreciate the viewpoint of the minority (Moscovici 1980). While the minority or majority may or may not influence

decisions, the capability of the public to deliberate decisions effectively is affected by their capacity and motivation to participate. For those who participate from the perspective of the majority, they are more likely to ignore opposing views, whilst those who participate from the perspective of the minority are more likely to seek out information in support of their views and ignore information that opposes their views (whilst actively listening to opposing views during the discussion) and prepare for the discussion by anticipating counterarguments (Levine & Russo 1995, Zdaniuk & Levine 1996).

Emotional affect can also have an effect on participation. It can have a negative effect and people disengage from public life, but it can also enhance the likelihood of seeking out new information and public engagement with key public concerns (Mackuen et al, 2010; Neuman, 2007). According to Delli Carpini et al (2004: 336) “there is evidence that the Internet may prove a useful tool in increasing the opportunities both for studying deliberation and for increasing its use by and utility for citizens”. They conclude that a number of key questions need addressing, particularly the reasons why people deliberate, what ‘rules’ impact upon deliberative experience and outcomes and what kind of deliberation is most effective? These questions are highly relevant to my research, not only in the context of public deliberation, but public deliberation through the media (Delli Carpini et al, 2004).

According to Barnhurst and Nerone (2001: 2) deliberation is the soul of democracy. They argue that news reporting “support deliberation by transmitting information to people, who in turn feedback in various ways – by their votes, of course, but also through letters to elected officials, poll results, or other political expressions”. According to Axford (2001) there have been three shifts in the modalities of politics; the most important being the *techno-progressive* stance, which credits new technologies, particularly digital technologies, with restructuring political space. However, Wring and Horrocks (2001) suggest, in the UK, the party system and continuation of party politics are only marginally affected by information

and communication technologies. Schudson (1998) also questions the notion that digital technologies can transform democracy by achieving the ideal of the informed, active citizen. Whilst there may not be agreement on the positive or negative outcomes of digital technologies on politics, there has been a transformation occurring which focuses on interactivity, immediacy and resistance to mediation (Barber, 1998:3).

Research on Online Debates

There have been many ways in which individuals have begun to express themselves online. From blogs to forums to discussion groups and commentary, 'the public' have been voicing their opinions electronically since the early 1990s. The question is, has anything that these private individuals have said been heard? Have their concerns been addressed? More importantly, do they consider their private issues being discussed online as a means to involving themselves in a deliberative exchange of ideas in a public forum? To answer these questions, let us consider the forms through which individuals have expressed themselves since the emergence of the Internet; the foremost means of which is no doubt the blog.

According to Rebecca Blood (2002) only a handful of weblogs existed in 1998, by 1999 this had risen to twenty-three compiled by Jesse James Garrett and posted on Cameron Barrett's webpage *Camworld*. From here, Blood argues, a community 'sprung up' and by the end of 1999 there were hundreds of blogs in existence. These blogs consisted of link-driven sites which were 'a mixture in unique proportions of links, commentary, and personal thoughts and essays'. From there, blogs began to develop into more of a journal-type format, where people would offer commentary on their day, something they saw, read or experienced to share with people 'out there'; they became more personalised than before.

As the technology developed and was made available on the Internet, more people started their own blogs. Today, some people have made a career out of blogging. *Kottke* is a traditionally 'old-school' blogging site carrying links and commentary; it became popular due

to its close links to *blogger.com* and has been in existence since 1998. *Dooce* has been around since 2001 and in a diary format; the blog became popular as the blogger, Heather Armstrong, was fired for blogging about her job. The *huffingtonpost* is a news website and political blog started by Arianna Huffington; it hosts one of the most popular blogs online today, and was ranked highest in popularity by *Technorati* in 2011²⁸. It combines ‘old school’ blogging characteristics with news articles, commentary and blog spaces. Whilst it is impossible to know exactly how many active blogs are in existence as of 2011, estimates range from 150 million²⁹ to 450 million³⁰ worldwide.

Although blogs are not the only format in which the public can comment online, they are no doubt regarded as the most popular. Other forms of public commentary include online Internet forums and discussion groups³¹ on every conceivable subject ranging from childbirth to astrophysics. Scholars have begun to investigate the blog in a number of ways. Some have analysed its potential as a social activity (Nardi et al, 2004) others its potential for developing online communities (Blood, 2004).

To date, research on online comment space relating to public deliberation has focused on news blogs, war blogs, political discussion groups, audience participation and the online public sphere. Trish Roberts-Miller (2004) conducted a study which left her disheartened by the lack of public debate in news blogs over the war on Iraq. She was dismayed at a system that ‘at its worst facilitated the hardening of ideology, and at its best, allowed for an expressive public sphere’. Zheng et al (2008) conducted a study on what content feature of war blogs contributed toward political discussions among readers. The findings suggest non-professionally written blog posts with a strong emotive element were more likely to attract

²⁸ See, ‘Technorati Top 100’ accessed 02.09.11 at : <http://technorati.com/blogs/top100>

²⁹ See, ‘So You Want to Blog?’, *BlogPulse.com*, <http://adfi.usq.edu.au/starlog/?p=103> accessed 02.09.11

³⁰ See, ‘So, How Many Blogs Are There Anyway?’, *Hattrickassociates*, accessed 10.09.11 at: http://www.hattrickassociates.com/2010/02/how_many_blogs_2011_web_content/

³¹ See, for example, *BigBoard.com* which lists forums, number of messages posted and number of users, accessed 10.09.11 at: <http://rankings.big-boards.com/>

comments, and comments demonstrated a relatively heterogonous opinion on the war on Iraq. They conclude ‘Further evidence will be needed to determine whether war blogs meet the deliberative ideal, which requires political discussion to be carried out in a critical-rational and heterogeneous opinion environment’ (2008:17).

Papacharissi’s (2004) study considered online political discussion groups in relation to greater political participation. Her study showed potential for the Internet to “revive the public sphere, provided that greater diversity and volume of discussion is present” (2004:259). Stromer-Galley’s (2003) study offers insight into user-experiences of online political discussion spaces, she found that ‘for those who are so inclined, they can use the Internet as the medium through which to participate in a public space and can, as a result, contribute to the public sphere’. Bergstrom’s (2008) study focused on audience participation on news websites. She discovered that, despite there being many opportunities to do so, the audience had little interest in creating online content, and that interactivity and content-creation online was firmly placed in the remit of individuals who already participate in the online world. What each of these studies has shown is that there is an *expectation* that online speech spaces, particularly those open to, and which encourage the participation of, the public, will develop into deliberative speech spaces. Yet, whilst there are indications such a space *could* emerge, it has yet to be fully realised.

Research on Online Reader Comments

The majority of studies conducted concerning reader comments have focused on comments being treated as one of a number of modes of participation with reference to participatory journalism. The emphasis of such studies revolve around appraisals of user participation by journalists, the use of participatory features by readers, and the management strategies put in place concerning user-generated content with some directly addressing reader comments (e.g. Diakopoulos & Naaman 2011b; Nielsen. 2012; Reich, 2011). Other

research has focused on the content of reader comments (e.g. Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011a; Douai & Noful, 2012; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012; Dashti et al, 2014; de Kraker et al, 2014) along with the influence reader comments have on other users (e.g. Milioni et al, 2012; Cunha, 2013) with further research beginning to unveil information about readers and writers within comments sections (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011b; Emmer et al, 2011) along with exploration of the effects of different management strategies on commenting behaviour (Coleman, 2008; Weber, 2014).

Within contemporary online digital media, a variety of website features enable commenters to participate in online commentary and debates, the most common form of engagement within online newspapers (Domingo et al, 2008; Emmer et al, 2011). Reader comments are of interest to questions concerning participation in a deliberative digital democracy and its relationship with the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2011). Online mass media such as news websites allow contributors to communicate collectively on important issues, to a large audience, resulting in the formation of public opinion (Gerhards & Schafer, 2010). According to Ruiz et al (2011:464) reader comments can be considered the most popular form of audience participation.

However, decisions about the selection of comments, evaluations and views for publication remains the domain of 'professional communicators' (Weber, 2014:942). This issue is somewhat overcome by online newspapers providing the opportunity for commentary and debate, in which ordinary users can actively communicate their views in an easy and accessible way, increasing the opportunity for discursive processing of news by contributors (Weber, 2014). The most common form of commentary occurs when contributors can post comments in a comment-field directly attached to an article (Strandberg & Berg, 2013). It is argued that immediate publishing, large amounts of space and minimal censorship offer

commenters the opportunity to participate in a way that posting letters to the editor could not achieve due to limited space in newspapers (Strandberg & Berg, 2013).

However, scholarly discussions on whether newspapers' readers' comments can fulfil the democratic potential for citizen discussions are divided. Some argue that readers' comments will exert a positive change on political communication (see, Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Schuth et al, 2007) whilst others espouse a negative effect due to low democratic quality and lack of deliberation (Kohn & Nieger, 2007; Hedman, 2009). Further research by Bergstrom (2008) revealed that the public show little interest in submitting comments. Conversely, Weber (2014:952) argues that there is potential for quality public discourse in online newspapers though "this potential only emerges when a number of users participate in commenting and when users repeatedly post comments to the point at which communication in the article's comments section becomes interactive".

The quality and content of readers' comments are also of great concern to newspaper editors (Nagar, 2009; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011b). Research suggests that readers' comments on editorials, reflect both editorial content and other comments, and may become democratic tools for citizens (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009). However, others report a high degree of comments that demonstrate a lack of respect, diverse perspectives and mature arguments in reader comments (Noci et al, 2010). This dichotomy between positive and negative outcomes of reader comments is characterised by Friedman's (2011:13) study concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in two online newspapers, in which commenting is described as "critical-rational debate, extremist demagoguery, friendly teasing, exhibitionism, and emotional pleas".

With regard to the democratic potential of online readers' comments, and the potential for online public spheres, there remains a great many theoretical uncertainties and inconclusive results from empirical investigations. A study carried out by Zhou et al (2008)

took the concept of the public sphere to analyse debates in the forums of the Chinese news site Doyoo.com. Their analysis was guided by four criteria drawn from Habermas' (1989) public sphere theory. Their results showed that rationality, justification for arguments and civility were in evidence, however, they also found that only a limited number of contributors participated in the forums, that whilst there was some diversity of viewpoints there was a lack of deliberation and found low levels of complexity within arguments.

Noci et al's (2010) study focused the comment forums of seven online Catalan Newspapers. Their analysis was based on a set of standards drawn from Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action. They argue that to identify an effective debate in the study of comments in news, a standard against which to compare the dynamics of those discussions should be set, they outline these standards as follows: first, participants should strive for coherent argumentation, second, participants should foster a collective search for truth, and third, participants should promote an agreement based on the best argument. Noci et al's (2010:62) results show that comments do not foster democratic dialogue and "hardly meet any of the Habermasian principles". They suggest that the majority of commenters post single comments, that though comments are not abusive they lack respect for others, comments lack diversity, lack maturity, are not fruitful contributions and do not consist of 'rational-critical' deliberations (2010:62).

Ruiz et al's (2011) study analysed reader comments on five national newspapers' websites, *The Guardian* (United Kingdom), *Le Monde* (France), *The New York Times* (United States), *El País* (Spain), and *La Repubblica* (Italy). They focused on Habermas' notion of 'discourse ethics' and a 'normative' benchmark for democratic debate (2011:1). Ruiz et al (2011) identified a diverse range of views and that contributors engaged in a high degree of argumentation and dialogue in both the *NYTimes.com* and *Guardian.co.uk*. Furthermore, contributors to *NYTimes.com* and *Guardian.co.uk* moved beyond the ideological views of the

newspapers and contained the presence, and tolerance of, an alternative ‘minority’ perspective which, they argue, helps to encourage debates. However, Ruiz et al (2011:464) are critical of scholars who, they argue, have paid little attention to these ‘conversations’ in newfound public arenas, and more specifically, the potential for ‘democratic deliberativeness’ in online news comment forums.

Chapter 2

Methodology

This study focuses on reader comments within three British mainstream news online comment forums, the *BBC's World Have your Say*, *The Daily Mail's RightMinds* and *The Guardian's Comment is Free*, to assess whether, and to what extent, these virtual spaces can be viewed as hosting an online public sphere. This study focuses on reader comments to assess whether, and to what extent three of Dahlberg's (2001) criteria for online public sphere theory are present within the forums. It comprises a mixed-methods approach whereby comments are analysed against three of Dahlberg's (2001) online public sphere criteria 'autonomy', 'discursive inclusion and equality' and 'exchange and critique', and using analytical tools drawn from Bakhtinian (1986) notions of utterance, speech genres and heteroglossia.

Rationale for Research Methods

Data are drawn from three news providers' comments forums³². These data are analysed using two distinct analytic frameworks: content analysis and sociological discourse analysis. These two methods of data analysis are combined to form a mixed-methods approach in which preliminary quantitative inputs compliment core qualitative discourse analysis (Morgan, 2014). The sampling strategy for this research is purposive sampling based on systematic comparisons consisting of "investigating the differences between systematically selected sets of people or places" (Morgan, 2014:129). This sampling strategy enables the researcher to select a purposive sample that represents a broader group of cases and to set up comparisons between different types of cases (Teddlie & Yu, 2007:80).

³² Whilst comments immediately following an online news article are often referred to as 'talkbacks' (Kohn & Neiger, 2007; Sikron et al, 2007; Domingo et al, 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Ornebring, 2008) they are consistently referred to as 'forums' within the thesis for the purposes of readability

The purpose of the content analysis is to deductively measure the prevalence of pre-defined codes drawn from Dahlberg's (2001) three online public sphere criteria 'autonomy', 'discursive inclusion and equality' and 'exchange and critique' along with elements of Bakhtin's (1986) theory of utterance, speech genres and heteroglossia. The aim of the content analysis is to identify areas of interest within the data to guide the inductively-oriented discourse analysis. The purpose of the sociological discourse analysis is to analyse the data inductively, taking into account Dahlbergian and Bakhtinian perspectives, whilst developing theories in order to understand the meanings associated with comments from the purview of participants, in the context of the forums.

Sampling British Mainstream News Online Comment Forums

British newspapers and television broadcasters who provide online comment forums comprise the broad domain from which the data sources for this study were selected. These news organisations were chosen for their provision of an online comment forum, statistical popularity with commenters, and a clearly acknowledged moderation process such that the dynamic between ability to participate and restrictions to participation can be measured. Using the ABCe (2011) statistical figures on the popularity of online newspaper websites in the UK, *The Daily Mail* and *The Guardian* were ranked first and second respectively and represent two dominant genres of newspaper, 'tabloid' and 'quality'. Both offer news comment sections on their websites ('*RightMinds*' and '*Comment is Free*') and exemplify pre and post-moderated³³ comments. To broaden the sample beyond newspaper websites, the traditionally television oriented *BBC*, which has expanded online (e.g. *World Have Your Say*, *WHYS*) comment forums is also analysed.

According to the BARB (2011) report *BBC1 News* and *ITV News* were the most watched television news stations in the UK during May 2011. The *BBC* has an online

³³ 'Pre-moderation' occurs when comments are moderated before being posted online; 'post-moderation' occurs when comments are posted online before being moderated.

comments section ‘*World Have Your Say*’ (which is pre-moderated). The *BBC News* was also the top-rated news website in May 2011³⁴, and is the only traditionally television-oriented news organisation in 2011 who offers a comment forum on their website in the UK. As such, a comparison is made between the online newspapers’ and *BBC* comment forums.

Sampling Forum Comments

The units of analysis are consecutive single comments posted by contributors during the course of entire individual forums, selected from the three British online news comment sites. The time frame for the data collection is between May 1st 2011 and May 31st 2012. To identify forums from which to select the sample I visited each of the three news providers’ comments sections and searched for ‘social protest’. During the time frame for data collection many events were occurring globally that fit the profile of ‘social protest’ such as the ‘Arab Spring’³⁵ and the ‘Occupy’ Movement³⁶ with much commentary concerning the importance of social media for highlighting and co-ordinating these events. Therefore, ‘social protest’ is a topical subject with links to democratic discourse related to these highly mediated protests. The name of author, date and number of comments were copy and pasted into a spreadsheet. The data was then cleaned to ensure the sample comprised articles and comment forums only appearing in *The Guardian’s Comment is Free* section, and forums in *WHYS* where no comments were recorded. The distribution of forums across the three news websites contained a high degree of variation in the number of forums open to comments, and the number of comments per forum. The sample for *WHYS* was further restricted by comments previously posted to some of the forums subsequently being removed and thus no longer visible or usable for the purposes of the study.

³⁴ see: ‘Top 40 News Websites List Puts BBC Top’, *Press Gazette*, accessed 07.07.2011)
<http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=47363>

³⁵ ‘Arab Spring: an interactive timeline of Middle East protests’, Garry Blight, Sheila Pulham and Paul Torpey, *theguardian.co.uk*, 05.01.12 accessed 24.02.15

³⁶ ‘Authorities’ impatience with Occupy movement grows’, David Randall, *independent.co.uk*, 30.10.11, accessed 24.02.15

The *WHYS* forums generated twenty seven forums from the search criteria on ‘social protest’, however, only thirteen contained enough comments to enable a comprehensive analysis (a minimum of three comments). As such, all thirteen forums were included in the sample. To ensure that the numbers from each of the three online news comment forums samples were proportionally representative, that is, the sample size represents the proportions of the actual numbers of the three forums in relation to one another; I calculated the percentage difference between the numbers of articles from the three different sets of forums.

The 13 *WHYS* sample forums (Appendix B) represented 5% of the 265 *RightMinds* forums; therefore the *RightMinds* forum sample needed to be 95% greater than the *WHYS* sample. I divided 13 by 100 and multiplied by 95 to give 12 and added this number to the 13 *WHYS* forums, giving a total of 25 forums for the *RightMinds* sample (Appendix C). The 265 *RightMinds* forums represented 39% of the 687 *Comment is Free* forums, therefore the *Comment is Free* sample needed to be 61% greater than the *RightMinds* sample. So I divided 25 by 100 and multiplied by 61 giving 15 and added this to the *RightMinds* sample of 25 forums, to give 40 forums for the *Comment is Free* sample (Appendix D). Therefore, 78 forums are included in the sample, totalling 9,424 comments. Each comment, as part of the subset of the 78 different forums, were then inputted into an Excel spreadsheet with information comprising pseudonym, time of comment, to whom the comment is addressed (e.g. author, commenter) and comment content.

The Problems of Using Data from Online Comment Forums

As researchers, it is important that information revealed by contributors within online comment forums be considered with a great deal of caution, particularly when making claims based on the content of comments, and which entail assumptions being made about how commenters represent themselves (Gonzalez et al, 2010). For example, the real identity of contributors (their gender, age, location, occupation etc.) and their motivation for

participating are difficult to verify when collecting data solely using online forums (Hancock, 2007). Moreover, some scholars argue that the process of deindividuation, and the relative anonymity contributors experience online, affects commenting behaviour and can lead to instances of identity deception (Donath, 1996; Herring & Martinson, 2004, Gunkel, 2010). Even when contributors must verify their identity via email, this does not lead to contributors using their real names in online forums (Cho & Kwon, 2015). However, it is suggested that using other methods of data collection such as interviews or surveys increases the identifiableness of participants, and the representativeness of data collected (Holtz et al, 2012; de Kraker et al, 2013:29).

According to Holtz et al (2012:56) there are several challenges that researchers face when conducting research in online comment forums; (i) the inability to verify information, (ii) fictitious nicknames, and (iii) the lack of clear sociodemographic data. All of these challenges are present across the *WHYS*, *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums. With regard to the present research, it was not possible to gain access to contributors in order to undertake surveys and interviews to verify their ‘real’ identities, yet the comments provide a rich source of data for analysing interactions between contributors.

Without the possibility of verifying contributors’ identities, the views expressed and choice of pseudonym (including self-designated gender attribution by contributors) within the three online comment forums are regarded as suggestive of their ‘real’ views and identities. Whilst acknowledging the difficulties of online research outlined above, this study focuses specifically on analysing online news comments, focusing on “data derived from comments [that] are entirely participant driven and presumably reveal the issues that matter to the commenters” (Henrich & Holmes, 2013:2). As such, it is the structure and content of comments, and their capacity to contribute toward an online public sphere, that is of greatest import to this research, and is the primary focus of analysis.

CAQDAS - NVivo

NVivo was used to support the qualitative analysis in this study because of its capability to import quantitative data into the program and integrate it with the qualitative data and participate in “a new age in mixed methods research, whereby true integration of data sets can be achieved” (Andrew et al, 2008:37). The use of NVivo also supported the need for a methodological audit trail for the purposes of quality assurance (Akkerman et al, 2008). The program digitally captures each analytic stage of enquiry offering procedural clarity and transparency in the process of data analysis (Akkerman et al, 2008). To further ensure the quality of the analysis, the coding procedures were periodically re-examined to ensure adherence to the coding categories, with adjustments made where necessary to ensure empirically grounded findings.

The 78 Excel spreadsheets were imported into NVivo. During the content analysis, I made notes of interesting issues and insights within the data that could later be used to inform the qualitative discourse analysis. Each coding category was created as a set of ‘nodes’ divided into ‘Dahlbergian’ categories and ‘Bakhtinian’ categories so that the data could be coded, organised, managed and analysed. This is particularly important as the preliminary content analysis was used inductively to locate specific kinds of data revealing patterns and potentially interesting avenues for the predominantly qualitative project (Morgan, 2014:148).

However, as MacMillan (2005) discovered, this was an extremely time-consuming process exacerbated by regular ‘crashes’ of the program, which despite regularly saving the data, led to numerous days of losses. There were also issues with the program such as whilst say five comments were coded into the same category at the same time, the program only counted those comments as one comment coded. Despite the project being sent to QSR for ‘repairs’, the problem was not rectified and required going back through previously coded data to ensure that it was all properly coded. Similarly to Welsh (2002) I did not use NVivo

to complete the discourse-analysis as the program was too restrictive with regards to the development of themes, instead choosing to do the analysis by hand as a more intuitive approach to analysing the data.

Content Analysis

The first stage of analysis follows the guiding principles of content analysis, defined as “a research method that uses a set of procedures to make inferences from text” (Weber, 1990:9). Neuman (1997:272-273) furthers this definition suggesting that “the ‘content’ [of texts] refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that can be communicated. The ‘text’ is anything written, visual, or spoken that serves as a medium for communication”. The ‘text’ in this study comprises individual comments posted to one of three British mainstream news online comment forums. The content is examined against two sets of criteria: three of Dahlberg’s (2001a) online public sphere criteria ‘autonomy’, ‘discursive inclusion and equality’ and ‘exchange and critique’, and criteria drawn from Bakhtin’s theory of utterance, speech genres and heteroglossia.

Phase 1: Dahlbergian Coding

Janssen and Kies (2005) provide a useful starting point on which to build a content analysis of Dahlberg’s (2001) three criteria ‘autonomy’, ‘discursive inclusion and equality’ and ‘exchange and critique’. With regard to ‘autonomy’, Janssen and Kies (2005) suggest beginning with a report on the case study in hand to ascertain information such as who organises the forums, what the aim of the forum is and how the forum is organised. They argue that discovery of this information may be fundamental to autonomy by identifying issues such as restrictions on topics for discussion and moderation³⁷. Secondly, Janssen and Kies (2005) suggest undertaking a meta reading of participants’ remarks on autonomy, particularly with regard to its absence. This study seeks to identify whether commenters are

³⁷ These issues were addressed in Chapter 1.

able to achieve ‘autonomous debates’ within the confines of comment forums within three mainstream news organisations with well-established political leanings and financial status. To measure this, comments are coded as ‘autonomous’ when commenters’ discussions move away from article content and focus on comment content within the forums.

With regard to ‘discursive inclusion and equality’ Janssen and Kies (2005) suggest gathering data on Internet penetration and participant demographics to measure the ‘inclusivity’ of participation within online debates, and suggest a meta reading of the perceived level of ‘equality’ within online forums. However, following a more detailed reading of Dahlberg’s (2001) discursive inclusion and equality’ criteria, I propose further categories which are important for the statistical analysis of this criterion. The level of ‘abuse’ aimed at commenters within the forums is an important criterion for identifying potential limits to ‘equality’. Following Schneider (1997) it is also important to gather data on the ‘distribution of voice’ which postulates that if a small number of participants make a large proportion of comments then they dominate the debate, thus creating inequality. To measure this, comments are coded as ‘monopolised’ when commenters post numerous comments to the forums, and under ‘control of the agenda’ when a particular commenters’ comments dominate debates. An analysis of the numbers of comments that are ‘moderated’ will also offer insight into the visible level of interference from the three news providers within the forums.

In their model Janssen and Kies (2005) suggest a content analysis of ‘exchange and critique’ focused on the ‘reply count’ of comments to measure the number of ‘exchanges’ within online debates. Whilst this is an important statistic, it is also important to identify the numbers of ‘dogmatic assertions’ and ‘normative positions’ to measure the types of responses commenters’ post, which can be used in conjunction with Jensen’s (2003:360) coding category for ‘argumentation’ consisting of three types of validity claims (Figure 1).

Fig. 1: Jensen's (2003) Internal/External Validity Claims Criteria

Validity Claim	Characteristics
<i>External Validation:</i>	The debater uses information from external sources and pursues an argument based on facts and figures
<i>Internal Validation:</i>	The debater argues based on his/her own viewpoints, stands and values, but these are made explicit in the argumentation
<i>Allegations:</i>	Claims without any kind of validation or presentation of facts

Whilst 'external' and 'internal validity' claims can be identified in addition to the 'normative positions' they support, Jensen's (2003) 'allegations' category share similarities with Dahlberg's (2001b) criteria for 'dogmatic assertions' (statements or claims given without reasons and are thus not open to critique) and has therefore been omitted from the analysis.

It is important to make defensible inferences based on the collection of valid and reliable data (Weber 1990). Reliability of coding was initially informally assessed with a small number of comments being used to refine coding categories and instructions with the help of a second coder. Training included identification of specific criteria in comments to ensure consistent coding. For example, 'location' is instructed to be coded as 'the given country identified by the contributor within their username as such 'Dan, Glasgow' and 'WelshPenguin' would both be coded as being in the UK.

Pilot coding categories were generated and tested against two forums from each of the three news organisations for 'coder stability' (one coder agreeing with herself over time) which initially comprised 85%. Following revisions to the coding categories nine forums out of seventy-eight, three from each of the news organisations were coded. This complies with Lombard et al's (2002) suggestion that ten percent or more of the full sample should be used for assessing reliability. Following coding of the full sample, 'coder-stability' rose to 93% and the coding categories were applied to all seventy-eight forums. The coding categories for Dahlberg's (2006) three online public sphere theory criteria are outlined in Figure 2. The results from the Dahlbergian analysis can be found in Appendix E for the *WHYS* forums, Appendix F for the *RightMinds* forums and Appendix G for the *Comment is Free* forums.

Fig. 2: Coding Categories for Content Analysis of Dahlberg’s Three Online Public Sphere Criteria

Code	Characteristics
<i>Autonomy: Freedom from State and commercial influence, issues raised by citizens</i>	
<i>Autonomous Debates</i>	Debates between at least two commenters, who exchange at least two comments each, that are focused on issues raised by commenters in their posts
<i>Discursive inclusion and equality: Everyone should have an equal opportunity to question any assertion and raise concerns of their own</i>	
<i>Location</i>	Given country identified by contributor within username (e.g. Anonymous, Ghana; GlaswegianDan)
<i>Gender</i>	Gender identified by pseudonym and coded male/female/neutral (e.g. Mr Smith, Mrs Jones, Anyone)
<i>Abuse</i>	
<i>Low Intensity Flames</i>	<p><i>Divergence:</i> In response to a question, issue or topic of discussion, at least two divergent opinions are expressed by participants (e.g. ‘The sky is red’ and the response: ‘you say the sky is red, but the sky is blue’).</p> <p><i>Disagreement:</i> Participants make direct reference to opposing positions, expressly disagreeing without attacking the opposing view, providing evidence for the favoured position (e.g.: ‘no the sky is not red, it is blue, science tells us so’).</p>
<i>Medium Intensity Flames</i>	<p><i>Tension:</i> Participants attack the opposing position, offering counter- arguments that attempt to deflate the weight of opposing arguments while inflating claims for the favoured position (e.g.: ‘no it is not red, have you looked out of your window today? It is blue, it is as blue today as it has always been, since the dawn of time’).</p> <p><i>Antagonism:</i> Participants attack the opposing participant, using name-calling and ad hominem attacks to undermine the opposing participant’s character and credibility, while focusing less on rhetorical support for the favoured position (e.g. ‘are you an idiot? Or colour blind? Have you looked out of your window today? Perhaps you should before making silly statements like that’).</p>
<i>High Intensity Flames</i>	<i>Profane Antagonism</i> Participants engage in overtly hostile, belligerent behaviour toward each other, using profanity, pompous tirades, and ‘cheap shot’ arguments in questionable taste, while often ignoring the original issue of divergence. (e.g. ‘you ignorant person, how stupid are you? Did you wake up today and decide to irritate sensible people with such BLOODY ridiculous RUBBISH? Perhaps you don’t have a brain, or it is only very small otherwise you wouldn’t make such ridiculous statements and make yourself look like an idiot!!’).
<i>Monopolisation</i>	Commenters who post two or more comments on a single forum

<i>Control of the Agenda</i>	Commenters who post two or more, and receive two or more responses in an individual forum
<i>Exchange and Critique: Reciprocal exchange of normative positions supported by criticisable validity claims</i>	
<i>Dogmatic Assertions</i>	Single statements or points without reasons for assertions (e.g. ‘You cannot condone drink-driving’)
<i>Normative Positions</i>	Views expressed with reasons for assertions (e.g. ‘Drink driving is wrong because it endangers lives’)
<i>Criticisable Validity Claims</i>	<p><i>External Validation</i> comprises the debater using information from external sources and pursues an argument based on facts and figures (e.g. ‘Drink-driving is wrong because it endangers lives. Statistics show that in 2012, 230 people died due to drink-driving, so people shouldn’t do it’.)</p> <p><i>Internal Validation</i> comprises the debater basing their arguments on his/her own viewpoints, stands and values, but these are made explicit in the argumentation (e.g. ‘Drink-driving is wrong because it endangers lives. You cannot excuse an unnecessary death and the emotional trauma it causes to the families of victims of drink-drivers. If you are thinking of drinking and driving, imagine how you would feel if one of your family were killed by a drink-driver. Save a family from the heartache by calling a taxi’.</p>

Discourse Analysis

Whereas content analysis identifies/attributes stable meanings to enable statistical analysis, discourse analysis focuses on the process by which meanings are constructed within texts. As such, in addition to coding categories resulting from Dahlberg's (2001) three online public sphere theory criteria, coding categories are also devised for criteria relating to Bakhtin's (1986) theory of 'utterance', 'speech genres' and 'heteroglossia'. The first constitutive element of the utterance is its boundaries as a unit of speech communication.

Each utterance has an absolute beginning, preceded by the utterances of others, and an absolute end, followed by the responsive utterances of others (Bakhtin, 1986). Such boundaries are determined by a 'change of speaking subject' in which the speaker/writer relinquishes the floor to the other's active responsive understanding (Bakhtin, 1986:71). These boundaries are constructed through a process of 'finalisation', described as the "inner side of the change of speech subjects" (Bakhtin, 1986:76). He suggests that interlocutors only relinquish the floor when they have said everything they wish to say, at a particular moment, under a particular set of circumstances when we "clearly sense the end of the utterance, as if we hear the speaker's concluding *dixi*" (1986:76) (Original emphasis).

Finalisation

Finalisation of the utterance has a number of criteria: first, there must be the possibility of responding to it which is determined by three aspects: 1. Semantic exhaustiveness of the theme; 2. the speaker's speech plan; 3. typical compositional and generic forms of finalisation. With regard to the first criteria, the referential and semantic exhaustiveness of the theme differs in different spheres of communication. They can be almost complete in certain spheres in which commands are maximally standard, resulting in standard responses such as in the military, or only relative as in creative spheres (Bakhtin, 1986:77). In less structured spheres, by a subject becoming the theme of the utterance, it

becomes imbued with ‘*authorial intent*’ thus achieving relative finalisation making it possible to occupy a responsive position (Bakhtin, 1986:770).

Such ‘authorial intent’ is described as the speaker’s ‘speech plan’ or ‘speech will’ which determines the entire utterance (Bakhtin, 1986:77). This includes the choice of subject (in some circumstances being connected to preceding utterances), semantic exhaustiveness of the theme (being limited by relating it to an individual speech communication, its personal participants and the utterances that preceded it), along with length, boundaries and generic form. Bakhtin (1986:77-8) states that “the immediate participants in communication, orienting themselves with respect to the situation and the preceding utterances, easily and quickly grasp the speaker’s speech plan”.

The third of the criteria concerning ‘finalisation’ is that of the generic stable forms of utterances in which “the speaker’s speech will is manifested primarily in the *choice of particular speech genre*” (Bakhtin, 1986:78) (Original emphasis). The choice of genre is guided by a number of factors such as the nature of the given sphere of communication, the theme of the utterance, the context and situation of the utterance and the composition of participants (Bakhtin, 1986:78). As such, speech genres are very diverse and taking account of such diversity, their structure also includes a certain degree of expressive intonation (Bakhtin, 1986:79).

Bakhtin (1986) also highlights the importance of extra-verbal communication with regard to intonation, which has been transitioned into online forums through the use of punctuation marks, abbreviations and emoticons. For example, capital letters denote shouting (Papacharissi, 2004), emotional responses are indicated by the excessive use of exclamation and/or question marks (Fayard & DeSanctis, 2006), and the use of abbreviations such as LOL (to Laugh Out Loud) and emoticons ☺ to designate particular facial expressions. In the

context of online forums, the ‘boundaries’ of utterances and their ‘finalisation’ are enforced by commenters choosing when to ‘post’ their comments to the forums.

Speech Genres, Expressivity & Utterance

In addition to ‘finalisation’ Bakhtin (1986) also outlines a series of criteria which determine the composition and style of utterances. The first is choosing a speech genre determined by the position of the author, the referentially semantic content of their utterance and their speech plan (Bakhtin, 1984:84). The second criteria relates to the expressive aspect in which the style and composition of utterances are determined by the referentially semantic content of the utterance, and the speaker’s subjective emotional evaluative attitude toward that content, with Bakhtin declaring that “There can be no such thing as an absolutely neutral utterance” (Bakhtin, 1986:84). As such the ‘expressivity’ of the comments were coded as either ‘matter-of-fact’ or ‘antagonistic’ in response to referentially semantic comment coded as ‘article quoted’, ‘article unquoted’, comment-quoted’ and ‘comment unquoted’.

The speaker’s evaluative attitude toward the subject of his speech determines the choice of lexical, grammatical and compositional means of utterance, and the individual style of the utterance meaning “expressive intonation is a constitutive marker of the utterance” (Bakhtin, 1986:85). Expressive intonation is intrinsically linked to selecting words in the process of constructing an utterance, in which speakers most often use words from other utterances and mainly from those kindred to the chosen genre that is in theme, composition and style, as a result:

A speech genre is not a form of language, but a typical form of utterance; as such, the genre also includes a certain typical kind of expression that inheres in it...Genres correspond to typical situations of speech communication, typical themes, and...also to particular contacts between the *meanings* of words and actual concrete reality under certain typical conditions (Bakhtin, 1986:87) (Original emphasis).

Consequently, Bakhtin’s (1986) views that speech must be analysed as a link in a chain of speech communication, is appropriate to the online context of news comments

forums, as they comprise dialogic exchanges which are interactive and ongoing. In contrast to semioticians, such as Saussure who isolates language and decontextualizes it into abstracted, individual linguistic forms, Bakhtin (1986:60) focuses on interaction; on the whole of the utterance in the form of speech genres that guides the process of speaking. Bakhtin's (1986) divergence from semiology rested on its failure to acknowledge culturally and contextually guided dialogues known as speech genres.

Bakhtin (1986) focused on specific elements of speech genres such as compositional structure, style, grammar and intonation as all being important in the analysis of textual dialogue and affective interpretation. These compositional elements are used to analyse comments within the three forums. Bakhtin (1986) suggests that all utterances are not only linked to preceding utterances but to subsequent links in a chain of speech communication. The utterance is constructed,

while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created. As we know, the role of the *others* for whom the utterance is constructed is extremely great...From the very beginning, the speaker expects a response from them, an active responsive understanding (Bakhtin, 1986:94) (Original emphasis).

A constitutive element of the utterance is its quality of being addressed to someone, it is both 'addressive' and 'responsive' (Linell, 2009:21). Both are important aspects of the utterance in that 'responsivity' is retroactive, and refers to backward-pointing relations adjoined to prior utterances that creates an active attitude to inter-animate resulting in 'addressivity' which is anticipatory, projective, and refers to proactive, forward-pointing relations to possible next utterances (Linell, 2009:22). The list of potential addressees is not exhaustive but can include persons such as a family member, a hospital specialist, members of ethnic group, enemies, friends or the 'unconcretized *other*' (Bakhtin, 1986:95) (Original emphasis). Both the style and composition of the utterance depend upon to whom the utterance is addressed, the writer's impression of his addressee and the intended force of

affect the author intends. As such, “each area of speech communication has its own typical conception of the addressee, and this defines it as a genre” (Bakhtin, 1986:95). As such, to whom commenters direct their comments is an important part of the analysis resulting in a broad coding category of ‘addressee’ before being refined to become ‘article author’, ‘commenters’ and ‘wider community’, with ‘responsivity’ being categorised as ‘open’, ‘closed’ and ‘provocative’.

In *The Problem of Speech Genres* Bakhtin (1986) highlights the importance of context and the positioning of ‘Others’ with regard to speech communication, he states that:

Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication. Every utterance must be regarded primarily as a *response* to preceding utterances of the given sphere...It is impossible to determine its position without correlating it with other positions. Therefore, each utterance is filled with various kinds of responsive reactions to other utterances of the given speech sphere of communication (Bakhtin, 1986:91).

The context and wider discursive influences on speech communication in interactive dialogues are essential to the analysis of how they are culturally and socially positioned. The structure of texts must also be taken into account in the way it affects interactions within online forums, which can be explored through the concept of heteroglossia.

Heteroglossia & Double-voiced Discourse

Heteroglossia can be described as a mixing of authorial and reported speech, depicted through the use of “another’s speech in another’s language” (Bakhtin, 1984:324). That is that heteroglossic speech constitutes a particular type of ‘double-voiced’ discourse; the intention of the current speaker and the refracted intention of the original author (Vice, 1997:19). Such discourses comprise two voices, two meanings and two expressions that are dialogically interrelated in that they ‘know’ about each other, such that they effectively hold a conversation with the other (Bakhtin, 1981:324). There are two distinct voices resulting in a clash of two discourses and two thematic formations, most often expressed as two sides of the

same argument, such as for and against an individual, situation, or opinion (Lemke, 1988).

The diversity of social languages, and the socially defined discourse types in a community, is both diverse and systematically related to the other in ways that depend on wider social relations between subcommunities (Lemke, 1988).

The presence of different speech and speaking positions within the utterance is what Bakhtin (1984:199) refers to as 'double-voiced'. "The author makes use of someone else's discourse for his own purposes by inserting a new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of its own.... In one discourse, two semantic intentions appear, two voices" (Bakhtin, 1984: 189). There are four variations of 'double-voiced' utterances two of which are described as 'passive' whereby the author controls the discourse of the other only allowing it to be heard in so far as it serves their specific purposes (Bakhtin, 1981). These two 'passive' styles of utterance are the 'hidden dialogic' style of utterance which comprises a conversation where one person's discourse is removed but the conversation's overall sense is preserved; the hidden speaker's words and style can still affect the discourse. In essence "we sense that this is a conversation, although only one person is speaking, and it is a conversation of the most intense kind, for each present, uttered word responds and reacts with every fibre to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person" Bakhtin, 1984:197).

The second 'double-voiced' style of utterance is the 'hidden polemic' style in which "the author's discourse is directed towards its own referential object, as in any other discourse, but at the same time every statement about the object is constructed in such a way that, apart from its referential meaning, a polemical blow is struck at the other's discourse on the same theme, at the other's statement about the same object" (Bakhtin, 1984:195). One can sense a double orientation through style, intonation and syntax and pre-emptive responses.

The other two of Bakhtin's 'double-voiced' utterances are described as 'active' in which the discourse represents "an intention on the part of the author to make use of someone else's discourse in the direction of its own particular aspirations" (Bakhtin, 1984:193). Here the third 'double-voiced' style of utterance is 'stylization' which "stylizes another's style in the direction of that style's own particular tasks" (Bakhtin, 1984:193). The writer constructs his utterance so that the voice of the other will be heard to sound within their own; if he wants the voice of the other to be heard and himself to be heard agreeing with, or reinforcing their point, the utterance becomes double-voiced. This process requires that the discourse be tested, and pass the test by meeting certain conditions. Stylisation incorporates a dialogue (Bakhtin, 1984:189-90).

The fourth kind of 'double-voiced' utterance is that of 'parody' in which Bakhtin suggests that "as in stylization the author again speaks in someone else's discourse, but in contrast to stylization parody introduces into that discourse a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original one" (Bakhtin, 1984:193). The discourse of the other is treated in a critical or hostile manner. In this instance, the discourse has been tested and found not only wanting, but in need of dispute. As such, parodistic discourse becomes a battle between two voices (Bakhtin, 1984:193). Each of the four 'double-voiced' utterances generated their own coding categories for analysis.

Reliability of coding was initially informally assessed with a small number of comments being used to refine coding categories and instructions with the help of a second coder. Training included identification of specific criteria in comments to ensure consistent coding. For example, 'external validation' is instructed to be coded as 'the use of statistics, official reports, Government and other official institutions and organisations including quotations to substantiate claims'. Therefore a comment which referred to official government statistics to substantiate arguments would be coded as 'externally validated'.

Coding categories were generated and tested against two forums from each of the three news organisations for ‘coder stability’, which initially comprised 83%. The coding categories were refined before three forums from each of the three online news comment forums were coded. These nine forums account for more than 10% of the full sample of 78 forums, complying with Lombard et al’s (2002) requirements for assessing reliability. Once all nine sample forums were coded, ‘coder-stability’ rose to 90% and the coding categories were applied to all 78 forums. The coding categories for Bakhtin’s (1984, 1986) theory of utterance are outlined in Figure 3. The results of the Bakhtinian analysis can be found in Appendix H for the *WHYS* forums, in Appendix I for the *RightMinds* forums, and in Appendix J for the *Comment is Free* forums.

Fig. 3: Coding Categories for Content Analysis of Bakhtinian Theory of Utterance

Code	Characteristics
<i>Double-voiced Utterances: Two ‘voices’ are present in the same utterance</i>	
<i>Hidden Dialogic</i>	No reference to, nor quotation of, the content to which the present interlocutor is responding
<i>Hidden Polemic</i>	Must have reference to, or quotation of, the content to which the present interlocutor is responding. Existence of a ‘polemical blow’ (a ‘dig’) against the other’s views
<i>Stylisation</i>	The current speaker quotes and agrees with the other’s utterance, before adding their own supporting views.
<i>Parody</i>	The present commenter critically responds to the comments of others in a point-for-point manner
<i>Addressivity: To whom the content is addressed in anticipation of forward-pointing dialogue</i>	
<i>Article Author</i>	Comments addressed to the Article Author directly e.g. ‘Simon Heffer. I disagree...’
<i>Other Commenter</i>	Addressed to specific commenters e.g. ‘Geronimo. I agree...’
<i>Wider Community</i>	Comments not directed to any individual within the forum.
<i>Responsivity: Creates an active attitude to inter-animate</i>	
<i>Open</i>	Comments open to response. E.g. I don’t know if going into Iraq was the right thing to do.
<i>Closed</i>	Comments closed to response. E.g. We should never have gone into Iraq.
<i>Provocative</i>	Comments provoking a reaction, using provocative language, abuse, insults but also through posing questions. E.g. Going into Iraq was stupid; does anyone really think it wasn’t?

<i>Expressivity: The speaker's emotional evaluative attitude toward content</i>	
<i>Neutral</i>	Comments made in a 'matter-of-fact-tone' e.g. 'assisted suicide is a potentially hazardous practice for the vulnerable and needs careful consideration'.
<i>Antagonistic</i>	Comments which are highly antagonistic containing abuse, insults, profanity, non-verbal emphasis such as capital letters and over-use of punctuation marks e.g. 'assisted suicide will help people get away with MURDER!!! It is a bloody stupid idea and any idiot who supports it should be shot!'
<i>Referentially Semantic Content: Choice of subject and theme of utterance</i>	
<i>Article/author Quoted</i>	Direct quotations from the article
<i>Article/Author Unquoted</i>	Direct reference to article content without quotation
<i>Comment Quoted</i>	Direct quotations from other comments
<i>Comment Unquoted</i>	Direct reference to other comments without quotation

Discursive Tools for Analysis

The discursive method employed in this study involves a detailed analysis of particular elements of the text, using a number of discursive ‘tools’ (Gee, 2014). Each of these ‘tools’ enables a detailed analysis of Dahlberg’s (2001) three online public sphere criteria ‘autonomy’, ‘discursive inclusion and equality’ and ‘exchange and critique’. The main three ‘tools’ include what Gee (2014:63) describes as ‘social languages’, ‘Conversations’ and ‘Intertextuality’. Other ‘tools’ for analysis include assessing ‘intonation’ to help situate utterances with regard to language and context, how contributors build ‘significance’ within their comments (such as using capitalised letters for emphasis) and what commenters are attempting to ‘do’ as regards the content of their utterances (such as using abusive language) (Gee, 2014).

Social Languages

According to Gee (2014) ‘social languages’ refers to the different varieties of language that allow the expression of different socially significant identities and enact different socially meaningful acts in specific settings. These considerations are akin to Bakhtin’s (1986) notion of ‘speech genres’ which focus on the compositional structure, style, grammar and intonation of particular utterances in a particular setting. In the context of online comment forums, participants can be deemed to be participating in accordance with the ‘social language’ of the forums, or rather their own particular ‘speech genres’. This is particularly pertinent to the analysis of ‘exchange and critique’ in relation to how contributors go about participating in particular sorts of discursive exchanges of views.

Conversations

Gee (2014:61) also suggests that discourse analysis is ideally situated to analyse ‘Conversations’ which refer to debates in society or within specific social groups, that large numbers of people recognise, both in terms of the ‘sides’ of the debate but also what sorts of

people are on which side. These ‘Conversations’ are akin to the Bakhtin’s (1986) notion of ‘utterance’. It is Bakhtin’s (1986) contention that all utterances are a link in a chain of speech communication. All utterances take account of past utterances that inform current utterances and influence future utterances. In the context of online comment forums, contributors’ comments regularly contain repertoires associated with preceding events, with commenters taking one side of an apparently two-sided debate. Thus they can be deemed to be participating in ‘Conversations’, or rather, in a continuous exchange of speech communication, or specifically interrelated ‘utterances’. This is particularly important with regard to the analysis of ‘autonomy’ in relation to whether commenters have the ability to be involved in debates which are free from State and commercial influences.

Intertextuality

Gee (2014) also refers to ‘Intertextuality’ that is when one text directly or indirectly quotes, or alludes to another text by focusing on “how words and grammatical structures (e.g. direct and indirect quotation) are used to quote, refer to, or allude to other ‘texts’ (that is, what others have written) or other styles of language (social languages)” (Gee, 2014:166). This type of ‘Intertextuality’ is applied to discussions within the forums between contributors, and is akin to Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of ‘double-voiced discourse’. These discourses comprise two voices, two meanings and two expressions that are dialogically interrelated. In the context of online comment forums contributors engage in four types of ‘double-voiced’ discourse which lead to different effects within the forums. Commenters’ responses are therefore ‘Intertextual’ or comprise ‘double-voiced’ utterances. This approach is particularly important to the analysis of ‘discursive infusion and equality’ in which contributors use the utterances of others against them to discredit their arguments, and in ‘exchange and critique’ in which contributors utilise double-voiced utterances within ongoing, reciprocal exchanges of views.

Adapted for the present context from Gee's (2014) discourse 'tools' the agenda for the discourse analysis phase of the study included the following questions:

1. What social languages (genres) are identifiable in the forums?
2. How are words and grammatical structures used to quote, refer, or allude to other 'texts'?
3. What is the speaker trying to do with the content of their utterance?
4. How does a speaker's intonation contribute to the meaning of an utterance?
5. What kind of words and grammatical devices are used to denote significance?
6. What issues, debates, and claims are in evidence in which commenters anticipate prior knowledge and how do these relate to wider historical and social issues and debates?
7. What does a critical reading of the data uncover about:
 - (c) Claims to 'autonomy' in online debates;
 - (d) Commenter effects on equality of participation;
 - (e) The construction of online debates?

These questions are explored by elaborating on the findings of the content analysis by way of a thorough and detailed discourse analysis as outlined above.

Thick Description

The analysis of comments requires the use of extended verbatim extracts from the data, allowing the reader the opportunity to agree or disagree with the conclusions drawn by the researcher, or to decide their own interpretations of the text (Jensen, 2007). This practice is known as 'thick description' which refers to the researcher taking into account the context, meanings and interpretations of the data, giving readers a sense of the emotions, thoughts and perceptions that research participants experience such that "they can cognitively and emotively 'place' themselves within the research context" (Ponterotto, 2006:543). In the following results chapters longer segments of texts have been included to allow a greater depth and richness of the data to be included in the analysis.

Theoretical, Epistemological and Ontological Considerations

Due to the unusual blend of quantitative and qualitative methods in this study, the role of theory, epistemological and ontological orientations of the chosen research methods should be addressed. Where quantitative research is deemed to focus on deductive theory testing, from a positivistic epistemological orientation and ontologically focused on objectivism, qualitative research is deemed to focus on the inductive generation of theory, from an interpretivist viewpoint with a subjective orientation (Bryman, 2008). Therefore these two methods comprise opposing characteristics on three levels which have been referred to as contributing toward the ‘paradigm wars’ (Bryman, 2008:13). The epistemological and ontological levels are considered to be incompatible due to fundamental assumptions about what should be regarded as ‘acceptable’ knowledge and how society and institutions should be characterised (Bryman, 2008).

A turning point regarding the ‘paradigm wars’ came with the emergence of a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). This has resulted in the development of two distinct stances on mixed methods research, the ‘paradigmatic’ stance which emphasises the paradigm differences between quantitative and qualitative research focusing on their incompatibility, and the ‘pragmatic’ stance which emphasises a pragmatic approach in which researchers should use whichever research methods are most appropriate regardless of epistemological conflict (Bryman, 2008:20). In the context of this study the research methods were chosen based on the different order of data they would produce and how they could be combined through the process of ‘triangulation’ (Kelle, 2001).

However, the combination of two analytical approaches can be challenging due to the divergent epistemological and ontological premises on which they are based. To overcome the epistemological and ontological contradictions arising from the combination of the

content and discourse analysis, each phase of the analysis is approached separately, therefore maintaining the premises of both, and limiting the contradiction between them. The combination of these two analytical approaches is comparable to Morgan's (2014) notion of 'complementary assistance', in that the combined strengths of the two methods increase the efficacy of both.

As such, where the statistical data found a strong correlation between 'abusive' comments and 'antagonistic' language, ascertained by applying the Spearman's rho test which resulted in a correlation of .885 with significance at the 0.01 level (Appendix K), it cannot explain how 'abuse' is constructed within the forums, what forms of 'antagonistic' language it entails or the effects of such comments. As such, whereas content analysis identifies/attributes stable meanings to enable statistical analysis, the qualitative discourse analysis is necessary to counteract the limitations of the quantitative analysis in its inability to account for the meanings behind the statistical data. As a result these data can be deemed to be 'triangulated' in that the statistical data alone could not provide enough information for sociological understanding. In order to understand the correlation between 'abusive' comments and 'antagonistic' language, the analysis required two complementary measures, one macro level and one micro level reading (Kelle & Erzberger, 2004).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the sampling and analytical procedures implemented for this study along with a rationale with regard to the choice of research methods. The combination of content and discourse analysis allows a mixed-methods approach to assess the extent to which three of Dahlberg's (2001) online public sphere criteria are present within the forums. Having detailed the research methods and rationale for the study, I now begin my analysis concerning participation in online debates by assessing whether, and to what extent, commenters within the three forums participate in 'autonomous debates'.

Chapter 3

The ‘Autonomy’ of Online Debates

In the following chapters I select website material³⁸ from three online news comment forums: *World Have Your Say*, *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free*. Using sociological discourse analysis and conceptual tools from Bakhtin’s (1986) work on utterance, speech genres and heteroglossia, I analyse the specific ways in which commenters negotiate, participate and communicate within the forums. Academic work on online news comment forums is an emerging area of research. Maria Torres Da Silva (2013) follows Youngs’ (1996) criticism of Habermas’ Public Sphere Theory, in that it fails to address the aesthetic-affect elements of communication, to analyse readers’ comments following news stories on the Presidential campaign in Brazil. In a similar way that Da Silva (2013) uses Young’s (1996) aesthetic-affective categories to explore the public sphere, I use Bakhtin (1986) to analyse the aesthetic-affective element of online participation in relation to three of Dahlberg’s (2006) online public sphere criteria.

My analysis begins by examining participation in online debates to establish whether commenters engage in ‘autonomous debates’ free from political or commercial influence. To explore this issue I analyse dialogues for evidence of autonomy of debates and the role of contributors in creating autonomy within the forums. An analysis of speech genres is undertaken, particularly concerning the style of utterance used, and its effects on the

³⁸ The extracts quoted in the following three data chapters are included as they appear online, as exchanges within wider forums, often posted non-linearly. I have not made use of the word 'sic' to indicate questionable readings as they would be too frequent. Some comments have been edited due the frequently excessive lengths of comments, but all apparently odd or erroneous readings are correct as quoted. Word limits also prevent quoting whole debates as web-pages are significantly longer than A4. Quoting entire forums is also unrealistic with many containing hundreds of posts, for example ‘Being a Slut, to my mind, was mostly fun – wearing and doing what you liked’ contains 486 comments. The exchanges of comments included in the following data chapters are representative of other exchanges that take place within the three forums.

construction of autonomous dialogue, along with an analysis of whether participation can be considered heteroglossic.

Autonomous Debate

Discourse must be based on the concerns of citizens as a public rather than driven by the media of money and administrative power that facilitate the operations of the market and state (Dahlberg, 2001c)

Dahlberg (2001a) is concerned that State and commercial interests threatens the autonomy of debate within cyberspace. As such, the ‘autonomy’ of the three forums is reliant on non-interference from State or commercial interests. For the purposes of this study, the level of ‘autonomy’ achieved by commenters is measured against influences from within the *WHYS*, *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums. In order to answer the question ‘whether, or to what extent are commenters able to participate in autonomous debates?’ the form and content of each of the three online news forums are analysed before reflecting on the potential for ‘autonomous debates’. I then summarise whether commenters’ autonomy can be achieved within the three forums, and the implications this has for ‘autonomous debate’ within online news forums.

Heteronomy in *WHYS*

The structure of the *WHYS* forums is such that it allows a series of responses to the original news article, rather than as a forum for back-and-forth discussions between commenters on the general topic raised. Dialogue is created in the reactions of commenters to news articles, though the dialogue is delimited by the lack of responses from commenters and article authors. Coleman (2008) describes these types of restricted debates as ‘managed’. This ‘management’ is a result of technological affordances that exert tight controls over debates, and are biased toward institutionally approved topics (Coleman, 2008) but also their framing referents, assumptions and common senses.

As such, *WHYS* forums can be deemed to be ‘managed’ in such a way that commenters are restricted to commenting on topics chosen by the *BBC*, preventing them from raising concerns of their own. Tsaliki (2002) suggests that, where commenters’ responses to article content are included in the analysis, the dynamics of the discussion will be heavily influenced by article content resulting in an analysis of article-influenced comments rather than ‘autonomous debates’ between contributors. Dahlberg (2001a) argues that debates between contributors can be regarded as ‘autonomous’ only when its focus is determined by commenters, as opposed to State or commercial influences. Within the *WHYS* forums, ‘debates’ between contributors are fundamentally absent in a forum deemed to allow contributors to ‘have their say’.

The Potential for ‘Autonomy’ in *RightMinds*

Unlike in *WHYS* forums, commenters on *RightMinds* forums demonstrate the potential for ‘autonomy’ from article content by responding to other contributors’ posts. In order to analyse ‘autonomous debates’ first we should clarify the requirements for a debate to be considered ‘autonomous’. Dahlberg (2001a) argues that “the Internet provides spaces that stimulate critical debate” and whilst they cannot be fully autonomous from State and commercial interests, they can offer a basis through which public deliberation can expand. Dahlberg (2001a) argues that online debate replicates the basic structure of rational-critical deliberation and approximates certain requirements of the public sphere.

Milioni (2009: 427) furthers Dahlberg’s (2006) conception of ‘autonomous debates’ suggesting that interactivity plays a key role: “Interactivity refers to the unprecedented capability for horizontal communication among users of new technologies, and as a structural condition of the public sphere, to a vertical two-way flow of communication” where publics “use these discursive, open online spaces as a platform for publicly exposing their matters of concern, expressing their views and engaging in political conversation” allowing

“participants [to] debate argumentatively about the issues under consideration and define, autonomously and intersubjectively, the rules and terms of their own discussion”. According to Coleman (2008), this should allow commenters to have more autonomy to set their own agendas and for transgressive discussions to develop.

However, following Bakhtin’s (1986) assertion that all utterances are a link in a chain of speech communication, how is ‘autonomy’ achieved in online dialogic texts? To assess whether ‘autonomous debates’ are in evidence within the *RightMinds* forums, it is necessary to not only identify ‘autonomy’ from article content in Dahlbergian terms, but to analyse how contributors go about articulating their views in the forums in Bakhtinian terms. Online debates in which commenters respond to other posts are intrinsically dialogic incorporating many different tones and viewpoints within the text and are guided by particular speech genres within the *RightMinds* forums.

With regards to the *RightMinds* forums, the foremost speech genre is that of dialogic responses to article content. Of the 1,663 comments coded under ‘referentially semantic content’, 1,412 comments were in direct response to article content (Appendix I). This speech genre comprises two elements (1) the structure of comments within the forums based on the content of the utterance, and (2) the style and tone of those comments. Commenters address one another in three standardised ways, providing a generic form of commenters’ responses in the forums (Figure 4). First, using the ‘block quote’ function to quote an entire comment (Comment 53³⁹), secondly, referring to, or quoting part of the comment to which they are responding (Comment, 246⁴⁰) thirdly, addressing the recipient without directly referring to or quoting their utterance (Comment, 168⁴¹).

³⁹ ‘The BBC Has a Duty to Represent the British Nation...but is it doing so?’, Sonia Poulton, 06.04.12

⁴⁰ ‘Corrupt Nation Holding a Gun to the EU’s Head’, Matthew Lynn, 02.11.11

⁴¹ ‘Jobs, Welfare and how the BBC went into Battle for the Socialist Workers’, Melanie Phillips, 26.02.12

Fig. 4: Three standardised ‘autonomy’ comments within *RightMinds* forums

	Article	Comment	Common Conventions
1.	The BBC Has a Duty to Represent the British Nation... but is it doing so? Sonia Poulton, 06.04.12	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ‘Thirty articles by Ms. Poulton 2. complaining about austerity measures and not a single constructive one proposing what should be done instead’ 3. And dear Lord, outrage 4. that a state-sponsored media outlet is slanting coverage towards the state? 5. Next Ms. Poulton will discover that the sun rises in the east’ 6. Do you require all journalists to come up with alternatives to government policies’ or just the journalists you don't agree with? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Referring to prior articles 2. Criticising bias & lack of input 3. Expressive evaluation- feigned dismay 4. Condescension 5. Epithet – short insulting phrases (Spertus, 1997) 6. ‘you’ forming an insult (Simmons et al, 2008) condescension, accusation of personal bias
2.	‘Corrupt Nation Holding a Gun to the EU’s Head’, Matthew Lynn, 02.11.11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ‘I am an ex-banker 2. I remember the days 3. when the drachma, French Frank, Spanish Peso’ 4. EX BANKER? REALLY? 5. That's why we're in such a mess 6. with people like you in banking 7. SPAIN HAD THE PESETA, NOT THE MEXICAN PESO!! 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-disclosure 2. Referring to past experience 3. Reminiscing 4. Capital letters denote shouting, condescension and sarcastic ‘surprise’ 5. Negative reading of situation, use of ‘we’re’ - being part of a group (Simmons et al, 2008) 6. Insult using ‘you’, apportioning blame on all bankers 7. Capital letters denote shouting, exclamation marks denote emotion
3.	‘Jobs, Welfare and how the BBC went into Battle for the Socialist Workers’, Melanie Phillips, 26.02.12	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. blaine, derby 2. you have had the wool pulled over your eyes 3. Your benefit is what the LAW says you have to live on 4. This cannot be changed unless the law is changed 5. The only people who can break this law are, naturally, the banks who charge you to take your benefit from one of their cash machines 6. This is done with impunity 7. and shows us the stranglehold they have on our governments 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Personal address, ‘you’ forming part of an insult 2. Accusation of blindness 3. Condescension, Capitalisation to emphasise point 4. Statement of fact – benefits change needs legal change 5. Condescension, unfair exemption for banks 6. Banks can get away with it, 7. ‘us’ and ‘our’ to demonstrate solidarity with others (Spertus, 1997), criticism ‘our’ government is run by the banks

Common conventions of critique include the noun ‘you’ used as a form of insult, with the tone of the comments largely being condescending and hostile. Commenters also include a great deal of sarcasm in their posts which regularly manifests itself as feigned emotional evaluative responses such as dismay or surprise. Capital letters and incorrect use of punctuation emphasise commenters’ views, with shouting denoted through capital letters (Papacharissi, 2004) and emotional responses indicated by the excessive use of exclamation and/or question marks (Fayard & DeSanctis, 2006).

In order to assess whether, and to what extent commenters can be regarded as engaging in ‘autonomous debates’, I analyse a short debate between two contributors on a forum following an article on the Government’s ‘Workfare Scheme’⁴². The first task is to assess whether those comments can be deemed to be ‘autonomous’ from State and commercial influence by commenters raising and discussing issues of greatest concern to them, an essential element, according to Dahlberg (2001a) of ‘autonomy’ in online debates. I also assess the extent to which comments are imbued with heteroglossic undertones which challenge the claim to ‘autonomy’.

Whilst the article is the basis from which the discussion developed, there are clear indications of specific individual concerns from both commenters in the course of their discussion. John Smith expresses concerns about the ‘welfare dependent’ state of the UK in comparison to the USA, that being on benefits is a ‘lifestyle choice’, and benefit claimants are ‘work-shy’ and lazy:

John Smith, Extract 1:

There is just no way you can sell such a policy in a *welfare dependency like Britain*. In America, different attitudes prevail, and the, "don't work - don't eat" ethos holds sway and *no one is going to give you a few dollars just to sit on your backside when there is work to be done!* The very idea of *paying someone to stay at home watching TV* when there is work to be done is anathema to that society, whereas in the more

⁴² Whilst the subject of the comments do not form part of the analysis, it is necessary for the general content to be known so that evidence of autonomy can be identified.

"civilised" Europe, governments help and support their citizens in times of hardship - but unfortunately, UK governments have totally given up on the idea of "helping" but have, instead, acquiesced in offering *an alternative life-style-on-benefits choice*, and chosen to import people from Europe and elsewhere to do the jobs that Are available, rather than trouble our own *work-shy claimants* to do them instead! We've just gone too far in *excusing people from doing Any work* -maybe a touch of that American, "don't work -don't eat" ethos might concentrate their minds? (Emphasis added, Comment 31⁴³).

D Ideerely raises concerns about earning a fair wage, the absence of 'real' jobs, underscored by an overt mistrust of the private sector, with accusations of the misuse of public funds and the widening of the rich/poor pay 'gap':

D Ideerely, Extract 2:

"and no one is going to give you a few dollars just to sit on your backside when there is work to be done!" - John Smith

And there you hit the nail firmly on the head don't you John? If there is work to be done - then why can't these firms employ people at a 'normal', 'livable' wage - to do it? Why, if there is so much work out there are they able to provide 'WORTHWHILE work experience' JOBS - *BUT NOT WANT TO PAY PEOPLE for doing them?* Despite all Littlejohn has to say (and his almost sycophantic followers) - the question remains - *WHERE ARE THE REAL JOBS?* Did not Cameron *promise that the Private sector* would provide *real jobs* to make up for those *being slashed and burnt in the Public sector?* No, nothing of the sort! On the contrary - we now have the *Government in collusion with the Private sector* providing 'work experience jobs' for the masses - and all paid for by the taxpayer - WAKEUP!!! The 'gap' has just widened-AGAIN!! (Emphasis added, Comment 72, *ibid*).

John Smith raises further concerns that the unemployed are 'inexperienced' in work, and that despite the creation of 'hundreds of thousands' of private sector jobs, they have gone to 'foreign' workers:

John Smith, Extract 3:

D IDEERELY...completely misses the point of the scheme, and *he might read Jim New's piece at 9.23 to get another slant on it's purpose?* These companies are *offering "work experience" for just a few weeks*, and if they Really needed permanent workers, then a couple of weeks work experience wouldn't do, would it? What they have been asked to do is to *let unemployed people have the chance to experience a working environment*, and these companies don't have any "extra" work to do, but are *complying with that Government attempt to stop even more people falling into that "stay in bed" syndrome*, by allowing them be ignored! And D I should know that since the election, *hundreds of thousands of jobs Have been created by that private sector* he scorns but, most of them, it seems, have *been taken by all those foreigners*

⁴³ 'Fight for the Right to lie in bed all day', Richard Littlejohn, 21.02.12

Labour allowed in! Not quite those "British jobs for British workers" Brown promised! And they didn't seem to need any of that "work experience either!" (Emphasis added, Comment 101, *ibid*).

D Ideerely expresses further concerns that the schemes do not result in employment and highlights the poor prospects for the unemployed:

D Ideerely, Extract 4:

“And D I should know that since the election, hundreds of thousands of jobs Have been created by that private sector he scorns but, most of them, it seems, have been taken by all those foreigners Labour allowed in! Not quite those "British jobs for British workers" Brown promised! And they didn't seem to need any of that "work experience either!” - John Smith

John, firstly, I understand the scheme perfectly and yes, I did intend to take a 'blinkered view' concerning the 'free labour' aspect! Work experience as a shelve stacker is not going to turn you into a prime candidate for any future employer - if Tesco don't even offer you a job at the end of your few weeks - is it? As to the rest of your comment (above) - you make my argument for me! 3 million unemployed and rising! I don't know whether to give you a green or a red arrow? (Emphasis added, Comment 124, *ibid*).

Whilst these are substantive issues which form part of *The Daily Mail's* repertoire regarding work and welfare, these commenters respond to one another's posts rather than purely referencing article content.

As with Milioni et al's (2012) study, who ascertained that commenters largely respond to original journalistic content within online news forums, so do the greatest proportion of commenters within *RightMinds* forums with 1,412 comments out of 1,987 responding to article content (Appendix I). Although John Smith and D Ideerely respond to one another's posts, the substantive issues they debate are intrinsically linked to the article from which the forum followed, and whose trajectory can be attributed to *Daily Mail* repertoires. As such, commenters responding to the contributions of others could be deemed to be debating issues 'autonomously', however, the existence of particular genres and repertoires associated with *The Daily Mail* provide strong evidence of a lack of autonomy and therefore do not meet Dahlberg's (2001a) 'autonomy' criteria.

There is evidence of words and forms of expressions identified in preceding articles and discussions regarding work and welfare benefits, which are also found in the exchange between John Smith and D Ideerely. The repertoires in play can be regarded as being based on facts or mythological fictions. Those who support the 'Workfare' scheme argue that it is a good way for the unemployed to get 'work experience' that could prepare them for a job, applying the mythological repertoire that benefits claimants are lazy: "The UK needs to wake up and realize a nation of lazy, unemployed leeches on benefits system will bankrupt the country in the long haul" (Caroline, 2010).

There are suggestions that private companies are helping the Government and the unemployed in this regard: "Hurrah for Macdonalds. Hats off to Gregg the Bakers. Lots of other firms [who] have got involved in a Government scheme to offer work experience to unemployed youngsters with the chance for a job afterwards" (Phibbs, 2012) and claim that participation is 'voluntary' (Mckay, 2010). A widely held view is that benefits claimants should 'do something' for their money, measured against the mythological view that benefit claimants sit around 'watching telly' all day: "It's better to get paid for what you do but if the alternative is to stay at home watching telly, or just aimlessly roaming around doing nothing that's all you will ever be - nothing!" (Tom, 2012).

The Government is largely blamed for 'benefits Britain' (Martin, 2012) with commenters articulating a strong desire for benefits 'reform': "we need a benefits system which is fair to all. The whole system needs rebuilding and has done for many years. Governments just tinker a bit here and a bit there but no government of any party has had the balls to overhaul it compleatly. Yes we need to clamp down on the workshy" (Alex, 2012). With immigration seen as a key contributor to the lack of jobs, largely blamed on the last Labour government: "the young people were let down by a Labour Government many years

ago. They introduced university course fees and invited lots of people into the country. End of” (Chrissie, 2012).

Commenters who are critical of the ‘Workfare’ scheme argue that this ‘work experience’ is tantamount to slavery: “anything less than a wage for your labour is slavery” (Andrew, 2012) carried out by private companies aided and abetted by the Government: “it’s the Government who have been paying JSA to the 1400 claimants who have been working for Tesco... If Tesco has all these jobs available then they should employ people properly” (Lima, 2012). Learning to stack shelves is not seen as an appropriate way for the unemployed to experience ‘work’: “nowhere, in any of the reports, is there any instance of proper job-experience. It's always shelf-stacking or cleaning...nothing for anyone with an education or hope of advancement” (Patacake, 2012). Furthermore, they argue that it is not only the young put on these schemes:

I know someone who is 55 doing 'work experience' for one of the big companies. He was originally employed by a bank as a senior manager before being made redundant. He has applied for jobs in Tesco, Asda, Argos B&Q and various cleaning jobs and driving jobs. He is told he is too old and over experienced (Jean, 2012)

There is also evidence offered (by a commenter) to support the argument that the scheme is compulsory, with claimants put under threat of losing their benefits should they refuse: “for the record these placements ARE compulsory, I should know as I can not claim benefit for 3 years because I told them where they could shove it!” (Jillian, 2012). Moreover, it is argued that this scheme is designed to make the poor poorer and the rich richer: “the good old tories want to take us back to Victorian times. The rich WILL get richer, the poor, poorer” (Mark, 2010) and that immigration is affecting the job prospects of British workers and that despite Government attempts: “The UK is already a social powder keg, there are no jobs, there is not enough affordable housing...our NHS and schools are near to bursting point, and STILL we have immigration” (Lisa, 2010).

Both John Smith and D Ideerely draw from a range of perspectives which situate his views as representing the ‘support’ genre, and hers in the ‘critique’ genre, regarding the ‘Workfare’ scheme⁴⁴. According to Bernard Cohen (1963:13) “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people *what to think*, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers *what to think about*”. This largely falls into the domain of ‘agenda setting’ in which scholars measure the relationships between media agenda, which influences the public agenda which may influence policy agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996: 22) and research has found that the media agenda influences public opinion (McCombs, 2013). Within the present data, there is evidence of particular issues within article content being raised in comments, as in the debate between John Smith and D Ideerely. Issues are reported and discussed in a repetitive dialogue in which news stories may vary but they are broadly focused on core issues which are recirculated within the forums. As such, complete autonomy from State and commercial influences cannot be achieved.

Having ascertained that comments can, to some extent, be considered ‘autonomous’ from article content, but not from their heteroglossic roots, I now move on to the second part of the analysis, style and intonation of utterances. Of the 52 comments coded under ‘autonomous debate’ within the *RightMinds* forums (Appendix F), 49 comprise an adversarial style (Appendix L). The ‘hidden polemic’ style of utterance dominates debates, and demands reference to, or quotation of, the content to which the present interlocutor is responding (Bakhtin, 1986). It affords the writer a critical stance against which to rebuke the claims of the other, allowing them to take a polemical ‘dig’ at those views. It is Bakhtin’s (1984b) contention that all speech is value-laden and always ascribed with “moral, cognitive, aesthetic and affective qualities that are designed to provoke active responses and explore broader perspectives and world-views” (Gardiner, 2004: 36). Yet, Dahlberg (2001a) argues that such

⁴⁴ See references above for further evidence of these issues in *Daily Mail* articles

emotional-volitional language is anathema to rational-critical dialogue, which focuses on reaching understanding through presenting persuasive arguments and counterarguments.

In the comments outlined above, both John Smith and D Ideerely use the ‘hidden polemic’ style of utterance, a style that is critical of the utterances of others. Whilst the style is critical, the intonation of the comments does not satisfy Dahlberg’s (2000:75) demand for ‘rational-critical’ debate in which contributors present arguments and counter-arguments in which the ‘force of the better argument’ takes precedence. Therefore, debates should contain exchanges of ‘normatively’ presented arguments supported by ‘criticisable validity claims’, which Dahlberg (2001a) deems necessary for commenters to achieve rational understanding, which is analysed in Chapter 5.

John Smith and D Ideerely focus on presenting their views, and defending those views, rather than producing arguments and counterarguments to achieve understanding. As such, these commenters cannot be deemed to be participating in ‘rational-critical’ debates. In Bakhtinian (1986:85) terms, the ‘expressivity’ of these utterances is adversarial and can be deemed to be attempting to provoke a response, which lends itself to creating debates. In John Smith’s first comment he condescendingly claims the US “don’t work, ‘don’t eat” ethos would never work in welfare dependency like Britain. He provocatively accuses benefit claimants of sitting on their ‘backside’, ‘watching TV’ and being ‘workshy’, a set of mythological descriptors of benefit claimants, before sarcastically, and unsympathetically suggesting the ‘work-shy’ should be subject the US “don’t work, don’t eat” ethos.

The tone of D Ideerely’s response is condescending, particularly noticeable in her address to ‘John’ in the first sentence. The lack of real jobs is a fact, and she uses emotive language to demand an answer as to where the ‘real’ jobs that were promised by Government are, questions appearing to be asked with a great amount of frustration and anger. She uses capitalised letters, considered shouting in the online context (Papacharissi, 2004), and uses

multiple exclamation marks to add force to, and express her frustration with, the current situation (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Fayard & DeSanctis, 2006).

In his second comment, John Smith's tone is condescending, and he points D Ideerely to another commenter's views that may be able to 'enlighten' her. He addresses her points of contention with factual claims, using condescending overtones, mocking her questions and views. He belittles her arguments and claims that there are jobs available but they have been taken by foreign workers, brought about by the policies of the Labour Government, forms part of the repertoire associated with the 'laziness' of welfare claimants. In her response D Ideerely is strongly sarcastic toward John Smith's assertions, and condescendingly mocks his claims concerning the 'benefit' of the scheme. She sarcastically concludes her comment, with a polemical blow, arguing that his comments support the views she expresses and the facts that unemployment is rising.

Both commenters make 'factual' assertions within their comments, presenting arguments and counterarguments with, and without, criticisable validity claims⁴⁵. However, the tone of the comments contains emotional-volitional elements and therefore meet Bakhtin's (1986:85) notion of 'expressiveness'. In considering these 'expressive' elements with regard to 'autonomy', both commenters focus on presenting and defending their views rather than attempting to reach understanding. It is therefore possible that the style and tone of the comments are the impetus for engaging in such discussions, which goes against Dahlberg's (2001) demand for rational-critical debate. Rather than focusing on the arguments presented, in which the 'force of the better argument' should prevail (Dahlberg, 2000:75), these commenters use adversarial language and provocative statements to belittle and discredit the other. Such provocation could be deemed to interfere with the 'autonomy'

⁴⁵ 'Criticisable validity claims' are analysed in Chapter 5.

of contributors as they may be goaded into giving a response, rather than articulating their response on their own terms.

Within the present data, commenters engage in a debate focused on the content of one another's comments, which also contains repertoires on work and welfare which regularly appear within *Daily Mail* articles and forums. As such, commenters do not achieve a complete sense of 'autonomy' from State and commercial influence (Dahlberg, 2000) either on a micro level (within this particular forum) or on a macro level (within *The Daily Mail*). Following Bakhtin's (1986) supposition that all utterances are a chain in speech communication, so comments within these online debates can be considered part of a chain of discussions linked to wider social and political issues. Furthermore, the 'expressivity' of comments may also affect the 'autonomy' of contributor's comments within the forums.

'Autonomous Debates' within *Comment is Free*

As with commenters on *RightMinds* forums, contributors to *Comment is Free* demonstrate the potential for 'autonomy' from article content by responding to other contributors' posts. Present data indicates that 3,994 commenters respond to the content of other contributors' posts (Appendix J), though, as with Al-Saggaf's (2006) study on the comments section of *Al Arabiya* news site, debates between readers are limited. Yet, commenters affirm Dahlberg's (2001) assertion that some exchanges between commenters in online debates meet the basic structure of rational-critical discussions, and therefore demonstrate potential for 'autonomous debates'. In order to do this, commenters must engage in 'interactive debates' as per Milioni's (2009:427) definition. These debates must include a two-way flow of information, where publics can express matters of concern to them by engaging in political conversation, and in which participants define their own autonomous rules and terms for their discussions. Coleman (2008) argues that this should allow commenters to have more autonomy over the agenda of discussions in online debates.

However, Bakhtin's (1986) assertion that all utterances are a link in a chain of speech communication, acts as a bulwark to Dahlberg's (2001) arguments for 'autonomous debates' online. As such we must analyse how 'autonomy' can be achieved in online dialogic texts. To assess whether, or the extent to which, 'autonomous debates' are in evidence within the present data, it is necessary to analyse these intrinsically dialogic comments in both Dahlbergian and Bakhtinian terms, which incorporate many different tones and viewpoints within the text. The primary speech genre within *Comment is Free* regarding 'autonomous debate' is that of dialogic interactions between commenters, with 3,965 comments out of 6,900 coded under 'addressivity', being addressed to the other commenters (Appendix J).

These dialogic interactions between commenters are comprised of two elements, (1) the structure of comments within the forums based on the content of the utterance, and (2) the style and tone of those comments. Contributors critique the views of others in condescending, patronising and sarcastic overtones, using insults (Spertus, 1997), by feigning emotional evaluative responses, and using capital letters and punctuation marks to emphasise the emotive element of their posts (Papacharissi, 2004; Fayard & DeSanctis, 2006)⁴⁶. Figure 5 gives an example of three generic forms of comment found within the *Comment is Free* forums. The first comprises commenters employing the 'block quote' function to quote an entire comment (Comment 81⁴⁷), the second comprises commenters referring to, or quoting part of the comment to which they are responding (Comment 79⁴⁸) and in the third, commenters address their posts to other contributors but do not refer to, or quote, the content of the comment to which they are responding (Comment 108⁴⁹).

⁴⁶ The ways in which commenters construct their arguments, as dogmatic assertions or normative positions supported by criticisable validity claims, are analysed in Chapter 5.

⁴⁷ 'Students will continue to fight to keep education a public service', Michael Chessum, 19.09.11

⁴⁸ 'Turkey is not a free country', Joshua Surtees, 01.05.11

⁴⁹ 'NHS Reform: How to Kill a Bill', Anne Perkins, 10.02.12

Fig. 5: Three standardised ‘autonomy’ comments within *Comment is Free* forums

	Article	Comment	Common Conventions
1.	‘Students will continue to fight to keep education a public service’, Michael Chessum, 19.09.11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “Which brings me back to my original point. Who ends up teaching the other three courses?” 2. Arthur – 3. I'm really starting to think your heart isn't in this change! 4. The same lecturer teaches those courses. But instead of teaching 400 students over 2 years... he teaches 100 students...for 6 months each – at...the same number of...teaching hours. 5. It's really not a difficult ... 6. There is no change in the teaching load - the impact is on the students. 7. Next objection? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Defending argument 2. Patronising use of name 3. Exclamation emphasises feigned disappointment 4. Condescension 5. Patronising 6. Statement of fact 7. Condescension
2.	‘Turkey is not a free country’, Joshua Surtees, 01.05.11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Violet24: "Homosexuality is strictly forbidden in Islam". 2. So? No one is asking you to have gay sex. It's about tolerating others. 3. If you ban everything that Islam disapproves of, 4. then you will have a totalitarian, oppressive society, like Saudi Arabia. 5. "it is forbidden in Christianity as well". 6. You're not a spokesperson for Christianity, so keep your ignorant mouth shut. 7. "but nobody cares about religion in West". 8. What a nice generalisation. 9. "That will never be tolerated". 10. So, you're intolerant people? That's nice. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Statement of fact 2. Condescension 3. Attack on Islam 4. Dictating about Islam 5. Statement of fact 6. Personal attack 7. Statement of opinion 8. Patronising rebuttal 9. Statement of fact 10. Patronising
3.	‘NHS Reform: How to Kill a Bill’, Anne Perkins, 10.02.12	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Response to themissing...Not sure where I said the Communism and Socialism was the same thing nice try though. 2. Plus...although the security services (and I would guess they would be of the right) came disgracefully close to doing so.no one actually tried a revolution when Wilson was in charge. 3. Again though, nice try. 4. In the meantime the combination of: 1. A bloody stupid govt putting forward a badly thought ...bill, and 2. Reaction showing even the best bill ever written would be attacked means...a stagnating then declining nhs...because no one will dare suggest any improvements at all. 5. I am more annoyed at the govt...than people such as yourself, but it's a close run thing. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sarcastic rebuttal of claims 2. Statement of fact 3. Sarcastic rebuttal 4. Condescension 5. Personal insult

Of the 3,965 comments addressed to other commenters within the *Comment is Free* forums (Appendix J), 1,260 were coded as ‘autonomous’ (Appendix M). To assess whether, and the extent to which commenters can be regarded as engaging in ‘autonomous debates’, I analyse a short debate between two contributors on a forum following an article on the rise of Chinese economic growth and its potential for global dominance⁵⁰. The first task is to assess whether those comments can be deemed to be ‘autonomous’ from State and commercial influence by commenters raising and discussing issues of greatest concern to them, an essential element, according to Dahlberg (2001a) of ‘autonomy’ in online debates. The extent to which comments are imbued with heteroglossic undertones which challenge the claim to ‘autonomy’ is also assessed.

In the example below, two commenters are involved in a lengthy debate. The debate is centred on the relationship between England/Scotland in comparison to China/Tibet which begins with Frustratedhistorian chastising Mervo for going ‘off-topic’:

FrustratedHistorian @ Mervo:

England has no claims on Scotland. Shall we keep to the point here (Comment 30⁵¹).

Mervo @ FrustratedHistorian:

“England has no claims on Scotland. Shall we keep to the point here” *A rather unsophisticated attempt to shut down debate there. Nice.* (Emphasis added, Comment 33, *ibid*).

FrustratedHistorian @ Mervo:

You want to debate something which has no relevance here, and has no basis? Ok, so whats the debate? (Emphasis added, Comment 34, *ibid*).

Here the introduction of a topic not directly related to the issue at hand is received with hostility. Whilst Mervo is interested in broadening the scope of debate to include

⁵⁰ Whilst the subject of the comments do not form part of the analysis, it is necessary for the general content to be known so that evidence of autonomy can be identified.

⁵¹ ‘China is Deeply Flawed: Its Dominance is not Inevitable’, Jonathan Fenby, 05.04.12

comparisons with similar situations, Frustratedhistorian is not. The following exchange is quoted at length to enable a more in-depth analysis of any ‘autonomy’ within the debate.

Mervo’s comments are focused on what he perceives to be the oppressive relationship between England/Scotland, which he compares to China/Tibet (Extract 1):

Mervo Extract 1:

Response to frustratedhistorian... *There is relevance because it's a point of comparison. The Scottish are having to negotiate the terms of their exit with the English (or are you really suggesting the two sides are equal?). There is a similar oppressor-oppressed relationship between the Han Chinese and Tibetans, although I concede it has some considerable evolving to do before it is identical to situation in the UK* (Emphasis added, Comment 36, *ibid*).

Mervo makes a number of claims to highlight what he perceives to be the hypocrisy of the English concerning their dealings with Scotland in comparison to China’s domination over Tibet. He argues that the Scottish were ‘forced’ into a union with the English (Extract 3), criticising the London-centred government for attempting to dictate the terms of the Scottish referendum (Extract 5).

Mervo Extract 3:

Response to frustratedhistorian... You couldn't be more patronising if you tried. *Your attempts to dress up English dominance as "British" are feeble in the extreme.* My original comment was an attempt to demonstrate *the hypocrisy of English criticism of China's domination over Tibet. That China's and Tibet's relationship is at a different stage of evolution to that of England's and Scotland's is irrelevant. Scotland was forced into union with the English by the English, are you going to deny this history?* (Emphasis added, Comment 44, *ibid*).

Mervo Extract 5:

Response to frustratedhistorian... It seems you'll say anything to avoid conceding that *Scotland was forced into a union with England in the same way that Tibet has been by China.* You're also *burying your head in the sands of denial over the fact that England is the dominant member of the United Kingdom.* You're also overlooking the fact that *London's England-centric government has recently attempted to dictate the timing and content of the Scottish referendum question.* If you are unable to interpret these events, then it is no wonder you are "frustrated". As for the racism label, a classic line of attack by someone on shaky ground. Shameful. Now, I shall let you get on and patronise other commentators of CiF (Emphasis added, Comment 51, *ibid*).

FrustratedHistorian is reluctant to discuss the subject of Scottish Devolution in a forum meant to be focused on China, though he engages in lengthy debate with Mervo on the subject. He argues that Scottish Devolution must be considered as separation from the British Government, with whom the Scottish would be negotiating (Extracts 2 and 4):

FrustratedHistorian Extract 2:

Response to Mervo...*First, the Scots are not negotiating for their exit, that hasn't been decided yet. They could well yet stay if they so choose...Second it will be with the British, not the English. I hate to break it to you but England only exists as a political anomaly and a geographical location; we have no parliament, no constitution, no head of an English state...You will be negotiating with the British government. As to the relationship between Scotland and its government in Westminster it can be looked at through a variety of perspectives, and yours is that of oppressor-oppressed something I know for a fact is not reflected in many Scots...there is even an argument for Scotland having an oppressive impact on England. The similarities between Tibet/China and Scotland/England is that both pairs have common borders. Outside of that I cannot see any basis for your point, so you will have to try to explain further* (Emphasis added, Comment 39, *ibid*).

FrustratedHistorian Extract 4:

Response to Mervo...Mervo sorry but you have nothing to argue here at all. *You cannot even accept that Scotland is not even in a position to negotiate a withdrawal from the UK because its people haven't decided if they want to...* At best you are confusing issues and not appreciating the whole picture. At worst you are being racist (and yes check the TUC website, racism can now be based on nationality too). *So please, if you want to do this sensibly in relation to China then please do; otherwise I have nothing more to say about it here* (Emphasis added, Comment 47, *ibid*).

FrustratedHistorian argues that the relationship between England/Scotland cannot be compared to China/Tibet by factually pointing out that Tibet was invaded and the England/Scotland union was created by choice. He defends the British Government arguing they are legally entitled to offer a referendum at any time and argues that there is no political 'England'⁵² (Extract 6):

FrustratedHistorian Extract 6:

Response to Mervo..."It seems you'll say anything to avoid conceding that Scotland was forced into a union with England in the same way that Tibet has been by China."

⁵² There is no separate 'English' Parliament for example

The Union was a joint agreement that the ruling elites on both sides willingly agreed to for their own reasons; Tibet was invaded FFS!...

"You're also burying your head in the sands of denial over the fact that England is the dominant member of the United Kingdom."

Nope, England isn't. As I said, there is no England politically, so how can it be dominant? So let me ask another question, in a nation of 65m, why is it wrong for 55m to be dominant?...

"You're also overlooking the fact that London's England-centric government has recently attempted to dictate the timing and content of the Scottish referendum question."

Actually the UK Government is perfectly legally entitled to offer the Scots a referendum. I think its shameful that Salmond is deliberately holding off a referendum for the maximum political effect and even then he might not get it (Emphasis added, Comment 56, *ibid*).

Mervo maintains the union between England/Scotland was made willingly, continuing to argue it is the English' from whom Scotland is devolving. He interprets Westminster's offer of a referendum as a 'trap' to 'thwart' Scottish independence comparing the refusal of Scottish Devolution as similar to Tibetans having to submit to China:

Mervo Extract 7:

Response to frustratedhistorian... "The Union was a joint agreement that the ruling elites on both sides willingly agreed to for their own reasons"

Care to elaborate on the events leading up to that "agreement"?

"there is no England politically, so how can it be dominant? So let me ask another question, in a nation of 65m, why is it wrong for 55m to be dominant?"

Ah, now we're getting to the nub of it: you want to deny the existence of England in order to give weight to your argument. Very disingenuous.

"Actually the UK Government is perfectly legally entitled to offer the Scots a referendum."

And Scotland is morally entitled to reject that "offer" if it senses a Westminster trap to thwart independence... If they democratically opt for independence, who are we to stand in their way? That would be like telling the Tibetans they have to submit to Beijing (Emphasis added, Comment 65, *ibid*).

The article is clearly the basis from which these two commenters begin their debate.

However, it quickly moves toward issues concerning Scottish Devolution and the relationship between England/Scotland rather than remaining primarily focused on the issue of China.

Both commenters draw from a range of repertoires which situate their views as either criticising England (Mervo) or defending England (FrustratedHistorian).

Although Mervo and FrustratedHistorian respond to one another's comments, the substantive issues they discuss are intrinsically linked to repertoires already existent within *Comment is Free* forums. As such, whilst the topic of the article concerns China, Mervo expands the debate to include what he considers to be a related topic and broader themes, practices also in evidence in previous studies of reader comments on *The Guardian* website (Ruiz et al, 2011:17). Repertoires concerning Scottish Devolution revolve around a number of issues and can be found in numerous forums concerning Devolution and Scottish Independence, including those in evidence in Mervo and FrustratedHistorian's debate.

There are those that support Mervo's assertions that 'The people of Scotland were never consulted on the matter of union, Scotland was feeling more and more marginalised by their exclusion from having a say on the Act of Succession in 1701' (Ranald, 2011) along with accusations that "Westminster is outdated ,undemocratic and Londoncentric" (Rodster1314, 2011) and that "People in Scotland can see, just out of reach, a Scotland that is not an English colony dominated with English stuff" (Heedtracker, 2012).

However, others support FrustratedHistorian's views concerning Scottish Devolution arguing "for the umpteenth time...Scotland...joined the union of its own free will and it can leave it of its own free will" (MorseCode, 2012) along with claims that much of the rhetoric "aims to characterise the debate as somehow England against Scotland... but there is no sense in the SNP or Scotland of the debate being anti-English" (BarbesBhoy, 2011) and that negotiating Scottish Devolution must be with the British as the "lack of a representative body for England actually leaves the Scots with no alternative but to draw "unilateral" decisions. No negotiations on (con)federal arrangements are possible unless England becomes a separate political entity" (Abiesalba, 2012).

Yet, none of these repertoires concerning Scottish Devolution appear in the article from which this forum followed, nor is there any mention of China's relation to Tibet. As such, it is an issue that has been raised by Mervo in the process of engaging in debate within this particular forum. Furthermore, other articles and forums concerning China during the sample period, do not include debates about the China/Tibet relationship, nor contain any comparison to other countries such as England/Scotland. As such, it can be argued that these two commenters have achieved an element of 'autonomy' from this specific article by discussing the England/Scotland relationship. However, substantive issues and wider repertoires concerning Scottish Devolution identified within preceding articles, and discussions within *Comment is Free*, are present within their exchange.

Having ascertained that some comments can be regarded as 'autonomous' from article content, but not from their heteroglossic roots, I now move on to the second part of the analysis, style and intonation of utterances. Dahlberg (2000:75) argues that emotional-volitional claims do not result in rational-critical debates in which the 'force of the better argument' takes precedence. He argues that comments should contain normatively presented arguments supported by criticisable validity claims to ensure commenters can achieve rational critical understanding⁵³. However, it is Bakhtin's (1986) contention that all speech is value-laden and ascribed with certain moral and aesthetic qualities designed to provoke responses and explore broader perspectives (Gardiner, 2004:36). As such, a Bakhtinian (1986) understanding of the emotional-volitional elements of comments must be taken into account when analysing the 'autonomy' of comments within the forums.

Within the present data, comments coded under 'autonomous debate' contain adversarial characteristics, and are imbued with emotional-volitional undertones (Bakhtin

⁵³ The use of 'normative' arguments supported by 'criticisable validity claims' are analysed in Chapter 5

1984). Of the 1,270 comments coded under ‘autonomous debate’ (Appendix G), 528 were coded under the ‘hidden polemic’, and 495 under the ‘parodic’ styles of utterance, with 888 comments coded as ‘antagonistic’ (Appendix M). The ‘hidden polemic’ style of utterance entails the present commenter quoting or referring to the other’s views in a critical, often sarcastic manner in an attempt to provoke a response. The ‘parodic’ style of utterance is identified in comments in which the present commenter critically responds to the other in a point-for-point manner, resulting in a hostile and provocative exchange of views

The exchange begins with Mervo disagreeing with FrustratedHistorian that there is no relevance to his point, that the two relationships (England/Scotland, China/Tibet) are not comparable, and pre-empts that he may argue that the countries are at different stages of ‘oppression’. Mervo’s tone is argumentative but respectful “I concede it has some considerable evolving to do before it is identical to the situation in the UK” (Extract 1). FrustratedHistorian refutes Mervo’s claims by making a claim of fact that Scotland has not yet decided if they want to leave the union. He acknowledges other viewpoints regarding the England/Scotland relationship, though he is condescending toward Mervo’s understanding of the relationship as ‘oppressive,’ using the nouns ‘you’ and ‘yours’ to denigrate his views (Spertus, 1997) before condescendingly requesting further explanation of how the England/Scotland relationship is comparable to China/Tibet “I cannot see the basis for your point, so you will have to try to explain further” (Extract 2).

Mervo attacks FrustratedHistorian for being ‘patronising’, directly insulting his attempt to ‘dress up’ English ‘domination as ‘British’. His tone is sarcastic and condescending; though he concedes some dissimilarity between the England/Scotland and China/Tibet relationship “That China’s and Tibet’s relationship is at a different stage of evolution to that of England’s and Scotland’s is irrelevant”. He demands a response to his

claim that Scotland was forced into the union with England (Extract 3). FrustratedHistorian's response contains an insincere apology and has condescending undertones. He rejects Mervo's understanding of Scottish history arguing that both countries willingly entered into a joint union. Using the pronoun 'you' in this context is considered as forming part of insult (Spertus, 1997) in this case combined with an accusation that Mervo is either ignorant, or racist (according to the TUC) and FrustratedHistorian concludes by refusing to participate further if Mervo continues making comments unrelated to the article:

At best you are confusing issues and not appreciating the whole picture. At worst you are being racist (and yes check the TUC website, racism can now be based on nationality too). So please, if you want to do this sensibly in realltion to China then please do; otherwise I have nothing more to say about it here (Extract 4).

Mervo responds by accusing FrustratedHistorian of ignorance, arguing that he not taking all facts into consideration, claiming that the Government attempted to dictate the timing and content of the Scottish referendum. The tone of his comment is condescending, sarcastic and insulting, concluding with Mervo taking a 'dig' at FrustratedHistorian's character "If you are unable to interpret these events, then it is no wonder you are "frustrated"...Now, I shall let you get on and patronise other commentators of Comment Is Free" (Extract 5).

Despite FrustratedHistorian's threat to stop participating, he responds to Mervo's comment in the point-for-point 'parodic' style of utterance. His tone becomes notably 'frustrated', partly demonstrated by an abbreviation of a swearing phrase 'FFS!'⁵⁴ He refutes Mervo's views with factual claims, such as that the UK Government are legally entitled to offer the Scottish a referendum. The tone of this comment is more condescending, more sarcastic and more insulting than previous comments, in response to what he perceives to be Mervo's behaviour as a 'troll'⁵⁵. He concludes by accusing Mervo of being intentionally

⁵⁴ For Fucks Sake!

⁵⁵ A Commenter who intentionally disrupts online debates

provocative and unrealistic “you sir are a troll, and it is no wonder you get “patronised” by other commenters...there is no patronising...in my replies, [yet] you still see it as such. Back to reality” (Extract 6).

Mervo also responds in the ‘parodic’ style of utterance. He demands that FrustratedHistorian explain events leading up to the England/Scotland union apparently believing it disproves his point. He also refutes that there is no England politically, sarcastically criticising FrustratedHistorian’s claims and accusing him of being disingenuous. He interprets Westminster’s offer of a referendum as a ‘trap’ to ‘thwart’ Scottish independence comparing the refusal of Scottish Devolution as similar to Tibetans having to submit to China. He concludes with the suggestion that it is FrustratedHistorian who doesn’t live in the ‘real world’, ““Back to reality" I'm not sure you were ever there” (Extract 7). FrustratedHistorian posts no reply to Mervo, though he remains active on the forum.

There is evidence of claims to fact within this debate, presented as arguments and counterarguments though they are largely unsupported by criticisable validity claims. Mervo’s claims that Scotland was in a position to negotiate its separation from the UK in 2011 is inaccurate as Scotland had not yet decided on a referendum (*The Scotsman*, 2013)⁵⁶. There are arguments that both affirm Mervo’s assertion that Scotland was forced into a union with England, and FrustratedHistorian’s argument that the union was entered willingly (Carrell, 2007). Mervo’s suggestion that there is a political England is also unfounded, for example, England does not have an Assembly as do Wales and Northern Ireland or a Parliament as in Scotland (*Houses of Parliament*, 2015). Whilst it is true that the UK Government suggested a timeframe for Scottish Devolution and a referendum undertaken, it is also true that the UK Government is legally entitled to do so (*The Scotsman*, 2013).

⁵⁶ ‘Scottish Independence: Timeline to Referendum’, *The Scotsman*, 17.07.13, accessed 11.01.15: <http://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/top-stories/scottish-independence-timeline-to-referendum-1-3004452>

Whilst there are instances when commenters engage in an empirical/evidential modality – citing ‘facts’ - within the debate, there are also claims that are unfounded. What is of more import is that these claims to facts are not strongly supported by criticisable validity claims, in that arguments and counterarguments are not supported by evidence to substantiate the assertions of either commenter⁵⁷. This means that they cannot be considered as forming rational-critical debates (Dahlberg, 2001). Moreover, the debates quickly become imbued with emotional-volitional undertones. Rather than the strength of argument contributing toward creating and maintaining this debate, it can be suggested that it is the emotional-volitional elements that are doing so.

With regard to autonomy, both commenters use emotional-volitional language to attempt to ‘win’ the argument, focusing on conveying their own views rather than attempting to reach understanding. Without strong arguments to encourage a debate, it is the style and tone of the comments that create the conditions for a discussion to develop, a practice that goes against Dahlberg’s (2001a) rationale for an online public sphere. Whilst commenters have been found to engage in ‘autonomous debate’ they do not do so in a rational-critical manner. However, by using ‘expressive intonation’ (Bakhtin, 1986:85) commenters provoke one another to engage in debate, using some claims to facts, but largely using condescension, sarcasm and insults to defend their views in the face of criticism.

Whilst the subject matter of the debate between Mervo and FrustratedHistorian can be regarded as ‘autonomous’ from article content, it contains repertoires existent within *Comment is Free*. It therefore represents autonomy on a micro level (within this particular forum) but not on a macro level (within *Comment is Free*). Dahlberg’s (2001) concept for

⁵⁷ Barring FrustratedHistorian’s accusation of ‘racism’ against Mervo on the grounds of nationality as per the TUC guidelines see http://www.worksmart.org.uk/rights/how_am_i_protected_against_racial_discrimination , accessed 11.01.15

‘autonomous debates’ suggests freedom from State and monetary influence. However, by employing adversarial styles of utterance, tone and language, commenters effectively goad their opponent into giving a response. They attempt to ‘win’ the argument by any means rather than by the force of the ‘better argument’ (Dahlberg, 2000:75). As such, the style and tone of comments can affect how commenters engage in ‘autonomous debates’ in that their responses to other contributors may not be as ‘autonomous’ as they first appear.

Chapter Discussion

Argumentation constituting the public sphere of citizen interaction is free from the influence of state and corporate interests (Dahlberg, 2005:10).

This chapter examined whether, and to what extent, commenters participate in ‘autonomous debates’ within *WHYS*, *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums. With regard to ‘autonomous debates’ Dahlberg’s (2001) criteria contain two key elements: first, that online deliberations should be free from State and commercial interests where commenters raise and debate issues of greatest concern to them and two, contributors should employ ‘rational-critical’ arguments to support their claims. Commenters within the *WHYS* forums are heavily restricted as to what they can post and do not have the opportunity of raising issues of greatest concern to them within the forums. In contrast, commenters within *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* respond to issues raised within the posts of other contributors, though these concerns are often based on recurrent themes and repertoires across the forums. As a result, *RightMinds* commenters do not achieve a complete sense of ‘autonomy’ from State and commercial influence either on a micro level (within a particular forum) or on a macro level (within *The Daily Mail*). However, commenters within *Comment is Free* also discuss issues that can be deemed to be outside the remit of preceding repertoires

within articles and forums. As such, commenters achieve a sense of autonomy on a micro level (within a particular forum) though not on a macro level (within *Comment is Free*).

Thus, comments in *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* are best described in Bakhtinian (1986) terms as links in a chain of speech communication where discussions are related to the wider social and political context of the forums. Additionally, in both *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free*, whilst the emotional-volitional aspects of the comments do not deter commenters from participating in debates, such content is anathema to Dahlberg's (2001) demands for a 'rational-critical' approach to deliberations. The emotional-volitional elements of comments have the potential to affect the 'autonomy' of contributors. By individuals provoking responses to their own views from other commenters, those commenters may become distracted from raising and discussing issues of greatest import to them. Consequently, none of the three online comments forums can be deemed to be completely 'autonomous' from the political, cultural and social repertoires identifiable within articles and forums of the news providers and, due to the level of emotional-volitional content in commenters' posts, they cannot be deemed to be participating in 'rational-critical' debates.

Having considered the extent to which the 'autonomy' of commenters' debates are affected by State and commercial interests channelled through social, cultural and political repertoires within the forums, I now turn to the analysis of 'discursive inclusion and equality'. This set of criteria is based on Dahlberg's (2001) supposition that when contributors post 'abusive' comments, 'monopolise attention' and 'control the agenda', the inclusiveness and equality of all contributors' posts are compromised. In contrast to his concerns regarding 'autonomy' which focus on social, cultural and political influences in the forums, Dahlberg's (2001) concerns with 'discursive inclusion and equality' focus on the extent to which contributors can influence the participation of others within the forums.

Chapter 4

‘Inclusiveness’, ‘Equality’ and ‘Abuse’

Every participant affected by the validity claims under consideration is equally entitled to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever. Inclusion can be limited by inequalities from outside of discourse—by formal or informal restrictions to access. It can also be limited by inequalities within discourse, where some dominate discourse and others struggle to get their voices heard. (Dahlberg, 2001:623).

This chapter focuses on analysing Dahlberg’s (2006) concerns regarding ‘discursive inclusion and equality’. It is Dahlberg’s (2001a) contention that “inclusion can be limited by inequalities from outside of discourse” such as gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status as in the offline world, which limits the potential for “every participant affected by the validity claims under consideration [to be] equally entitled to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever”. As such, a brief analysis of the gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status of participants is undertaken to establish to what extent this affects participation.

The second part of the analysis focuses on inclusiveness and equality of participation within the three online forums. Dahlberg (2001a) is concerned that “inequalities within discourse, where some dominate discourse and others struggle to get their voices heard” are manifested through abuse⁵⁸, monopolisation and control of the agenda. He argues that these three practices affect the equality of participation for contributors in online debates. To explore the parameters of ‘inclusive’ and ‘equal’ dialogue in the forums, the form and content of each of the three online news forums are analysed. I then reflect on the potential for ‘discursive inclusion and equality’ by assessing the extent to which (and ways through which) commenters negotiate the terms of inclusion and equality in the forums.

⁵⁸ Dahlberg (2000:188) refers to ‘abusive’ comments through a variety of definitions such as ‘strong rhetoric’, ‘spam’ and ‘flaming’. For the purposes of this study the variety of definitions Dahlberg (2000) uses are encompassed under the umbrella term of ‘abusive’ comments.

Exclusivity and Inequality in WHYS

When considering ‘inclusivity’ and ‘equality’ within online debate, Dahlberg (2001a) posits that everyone should have equal entitlement to include, and question, any assertion concerning the issue under consideration. Moreover, certain exclusions and inequalities can hamper participation. External exclusions and inequalities include gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status (Dahlberg, 2001a). Based on self-designated gender-attributed pseudonyms commenters ascribe themselves e.g. ‘Alan in AZ’ or ‘Rosetta in Jamaica’ (see Tang et al, 2010; Liu & Ruths, 2013), out of 199 comments, more male-gendered than female-gendered contributors⁵⁹, 54 compared to 36 respectively, contributed to the forums, with 109 commenters who did not disclose their gender, instead using a not explicitly gendered pseudonym such as ‘wild g’ or ‘anonymous’ (Appendix N). This finding indicates that more male-gendered than female-gendered commenters are contributing to the forums, though the information supplied by commenters must be considered with caution, as the real identities of contributors could not be verified.

In countries where Internet penetration was <20% in 2011 (Internet Population & Penetration, 2011) commenters from eleven countries⁶⁰ contributed sixteen comments to the *WHYS* forums (Appendix N). Despite the low level of Internet penetration in these countries, and related negative effects of ethnicity and socio-economic status, some commenters are engaging in online political debate, though exclusions and inequalities in relation to gender (Da Silva, 2013b; Iosub et al, 2014), ethnicity and socio-economic status continue to negatively influence online participation (James, 2011; Hargittai, 2008). In countries where

⁵⁹ In the following chapters, the phrases ‘male-gendered’ and ‘female-gendered’ commenters/contributors refers to results based on the self-designated gender-attributed pseudonyms commenters ascribe themselves.

⁶⁰ Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, India, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe

Internet penetration exceeded 80% in 2011 (Internet Population & Penetration, 2011⁶¹) 9 out of 10 comments were posted by male-gendered contributors (Appendix N). Whilst these statistics are very limited, and cannot be considered wholly representative of the contributors to the forums, they do suggest Dahlberg's (2001a) concerns over the marginal numbers of women participating in online debates have some empirical basis within the *WHYS* forums.

The racial or ethnic identities of commenters within the *WHYS* forums are rarely indicated unless the discussion requires knowledge of such identities. Similarly, the socio-economic status of contributors is not forthcoming, limiting the capacity to analyse the level of engagement of these strata. According to the Office for National Statistics in 2014⁶², there are small differences between ethnic groups when it comes to Internet use, with the highest rates (over 90%) among adults who identified themselves as Mixed Ethnic or Chinese, followed by Other Asian, Other Ethnic Group, Black or Indian, and White at more than 80%.

The statistics also show that Internet use has almost reached full coverage for households earning in excess of £500 per week, with all households with weekly earnings above this level having 99% coverage (ONS, 2011). This finding is supported by data from the Oxford Internet Institute (2011) which shows that people with higher household income are more likely to use the Internet, with only 43% usage in households earning less than £12,500. Whilst these statistics are not directly applicable to the present data, they suggest that in the UK, a significant number of individuals who have ever used the Internet include ethnic minorities, though Internet use remains associated with higher socio-economic status. This finding is corroborated by Livingston's (2011) study which found overall ethnic equality

⁶¹ New Zealand, UK

⁶² See data for statistics 2011-2014: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcn%3A77-336652>

regarding Internet use, and Hargittai's (2008) study that found socio-economic status continues to play a part in determining online participation.

Abuse in WHYS

Within the present data, the structure of the forums is such that it allows a series of responses to the original news article, rather than as a forum for back-and-forth discussions between commenters on the general topic raised. Coleman (2008) describes these types of restricted debates as 'managed'. This 'management' is the result of technological affordances that exert tight controls over debates, and are biased toward institutionally approved topics (Coleman, 2008).

As such, *WHYS* forums are 'managed' with the aim of restricting commenters' focus to responding to the article content, on topics chosen by the *BBC*, not in response to other commenters' posts. Abusive postings are used to belittle and humiliate others often in the form of racist and sexist remarks along with other forms of abuse (Dahlberg, 2001a)⁶³. This can lead to groups who are marginalised offline to also be marginalised online such as women and non-white ethnic groups (Dahlberg, 2001a). Pre-moderation within the *WHYS* forums ensure that no comments that could be regarded as 'abusive' are published. As such, explicit interpersonal abuse is formally ruled out of *WHYS* forums.

Monopolisation in WHYS

The second issue that concerns Dahlberg (2001a) is that of 'monopolisation' which affects the inclusiveness and equality of perspectives presented within online debates.

Monopolisation is the result of a small number of commenters posting numerous comments, leaving the majority to 'lurk'⁶⁴ (Nonnecke et al, 2006). Within the present data, 157 out of

⁶³ The analysis of 'abuse' in this chapter serves as a means to understand the level and intensity of 'abuse' within the forums, and the effects on the inclusiveness and equality of participation.

⁶⁴ 'Lurking' refers to commenters reading comments but not commenting

199 contributors provide a named pseudonym allowing their comments to be tracked (Appendix N). Whilst some of these commenters have contributed to the same forums, they cannot be deemed to be ‘monopolising’ the forums, as they do not post numerous comments. There are, on average, fifteen comments per forum (Appendix B), which if taken to be by separate contributors⁶⁵, could be seen as a bulwark against the threat of monopolisation that Dahlberg (2001a) envisages.

Control of the Agenda in WHYS

Dahlberg (2001a) also has concerns that some contributors exert such influence over others that they can ‘control the agenda’. Commenters influence the agenda and style of debates subtly without using abusive posts, or monopolisation, such that the inclusiveness and equality⁶⁶ of discussions become marred by the thoughts, opinions and interests of a few contributors (Dahlberg, 2001a). This more subtle approach is difficult to detect, yet, it is clear within *WHYS* forums that commenters are unable to ‘control the agenda’.

In order to exert influence over others commenters need their comments to be effective. The restrictions placed on commenters both in relation to the ‘managed’ structure of the forum (Coleman, 2008) and moderation practices renders commenters unable to unduly influence the views of others. As with Wright & Street’s (2007) findings, commenters are unable to participate in sustained exertion of one commenter’s influence over others, thus ‘control of agenda’ is not in evidence within the *WHYS* forums.

⁶⁵ With *WHYS* ‘house-rules’ stipulating that contributors should not hold multiple memberships, I assume that named contributors who post individual comments are different people

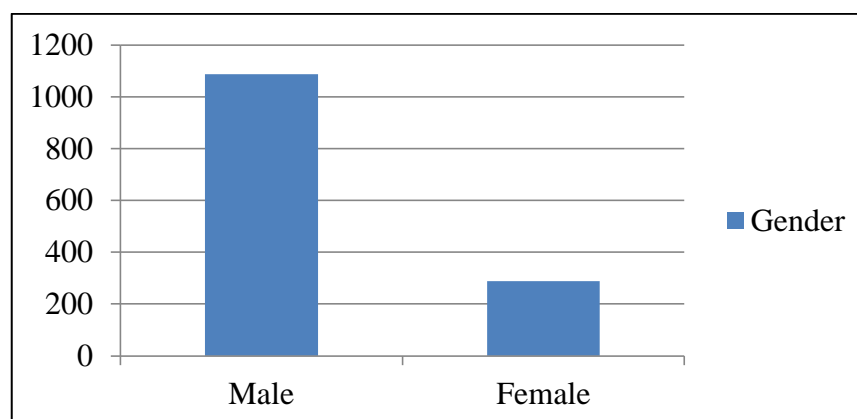
⁶⁶ According to Dahlberg (2001a) ‘inclusiveness’ refers to the process by which *all* manner of comments and perspectives should be equally included within online debate. ‘Inclusivity’ refers to issues such as gender; ethnicity and socio-economic status, which can affect a person’s access to online participation.

Power Play in *RightMinds*

As with commenters on *WHYS* forums, external factors affect the potential for *RightMinds* commenters participating in online debates. External exclusions and inequalities that affect participation include gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status (Dahlberg, 2001a). Recent research suggests that these factors continue to be key predictors of Internet use (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011; Hargittai, 2008; DiMaggio et al, 2004; Selwyn, 2004; Selwyn & Facer, 2009); van Dijk 2005, 2006). The gendered nature of the pseudonyms, such as ‘Gordon Webster’ and ‘Mrs C’, that commenters ascribed themselves has been utilised in previous research to ascertain the numbers of men and women contributing to online forums (Tang et al, 2010; Liu & Ruths, 2013).

Using this method, present data shows that of 1,987 comments, 1,085 were coded as being posted by male-gendered contributors in comparison to 345 female-gendered contributors (Appendix O) as can be seen in Figure 6. Due to the self-gendered nature of pseudonyms, the actual numbers of male and female contributors is not known; however, these figures suggest that more male than female-gendered contributors post comments to the forums, a finding supported by ONS (2011) who report that 84.7% of men used the Internet in 2011 compared to 79.9% of women.

Fig. 6: Gender Difference between numbers of Contributors to *RightMinds* Forums



Within the present data, only four contributors identified via given location posted comments from countries with <20% Internet penetration (Internet Population and Penetration, 2011)⁶⁷, and all were coded as male-gendered. In contrast, of the 1,657 comments posted from countries with >80% Internet penetration (Internet population and Penetration, 2011)⁶⁸, 925 were coded as by male-gendered and 244 as by female-gendered contributors (Appendix P). Of the 1,987 comments posted, 1,629 were posted from the UK (Appendix P). Whilst the real identities of the commenters was not established in this study, these statistics suggest that Dahlberg's (2006) concerns over the marginal numbers of women participating in online debates could have some credence within the *RightMinds* forums.

However, with regard to the recipients of 'abuse', whilst scholars have identified women as one of the key receivers of 'abuse' within online forums (Megarry, 2014), of 943 'abusive' comments, 504 were posted by male-gendered commenters and 150 by female-gendered contributors. Of the 234 commenters in receipt of 'abusive' comments, 133 were directed toward male-gendered commenters and 45 toward female-gendered contributors (Appendix Q). Consequently, it can be suggested that it is male, rather than female-gendered contributors who post and receive the greatest number of 'abusive' posts.

Within the *RightMinds* forums, the racial or ethnic identities of commenters and their socioeconomic status are rarely revealed, unless the discussion requires such disclosure. This limits the capacity to analyse the level of engagement of these strata. Although official statistics show that there are only small differences between ethnic groups when it comes to Internet use (ONS, 2014), they also show that Internet use remains highest amongst people with higher household incomes (ONS, 2011; Oxford Internet Institute, 2011). These statistics demonstrate that in the UK, a significant number of individuals who have ever used the

⁶⁷ Ghana, Indonesia, Uganda

⁶⁸ Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, UK

Internet include ethnic minorities, though Internet use remains associated with higher socio-economic status, which are corroborated by research conducted by Hargittai (2008) and Livingston (2011).

The Human Element in ‘Inclusiveness’ & ‘Equality’

Whilst Dahlberg (2001a) has concerns about exclusivity and inequality from outside online forums, he also has concerns about actions within online forums. He argues that abuse, monopolisation, and control of the agenda can negatively affect inclusiveness and equality in online debates, suggesting that “there is no doubt that a significant number of online deliberations have at one time or another been disrupted by abusive postings” (Dahlberg, 2001:189). Of the twenty-five forums sampled, nine were pre-moderated meaning all comments required moderator approval prior to publication. Despite this, of the 943 comments coded as ‘abusive’, 410 comments came from moderated forums, and 533 came from non-moderated forums (Appendix Q). Dahlberg’s (2000:198) concerns over inequality within online debates centres on contributors being ‘abusive’ toward one another:

The most rudimentary way [for] individuals or groups...to silence others is through abusive postings, postings that...not only involve the biting...sarcastic content that the term flaming encompasses but that may aim to belittle and humiliate others.

Yet it has been suggested that some forms of ‘abuse’, such as ‘flaming’ have become “an unfortunate but quite acceptable category of interaction in virtual space” (Lee, 2005: 385).

Dahlberg’s (2006) second issue concerning inclusiveness and equality relates to certain commenters ‘monopolising’ online debates. He suggests inconsiderate participants monopolise the attention of others in online discussions, creating an unequal balance of views (Dahlberg, 2001a). The so-called ‘equal voice’ perspective postulates that if a limited number of contributors post the majority of comments, they dominate the discussion

(Schneider, 1997; Jensen, 2003) allowing them to ‘monopolise’ online debates (Beyers, 2004:13-14; Da Silva, 2014:105).

Dahlberg’s (2001) third concern relating to inclusiveness and equality is that of ‘control of the agenda’ which requires a more subtle approach in comparison to those who use abusive language and monopolise the forums, suggesting that “dominant participants may not necessarily be directly abusive or say more; rather, they assert their influence and side-line other participant's views by dictating the agenda and style of dialogue”. Whilst Dahlberg (2000:203) argues that measures can be put in place to reduce the risk of ‘abuse’ within online debates, there is little impetus for reducing the risk that the agenda and discursive style may become dominated by certain individuals (Dahlberg, 2001).

To measure the ‘abusive’ nature of comments, ‘monopolisation of attention’ and ‘control of the agenda’, I measure comments against Thompsen & Foulger’s (1996:228-9) definition of low, medium and high intensity ‘flaming’ (Figure 7).

Fig. 7: Thompsen & Foulger’s (1996) Flaming Intensity Criteria

Intensity	Descriptor	Characteristics
Low	<i>Divergence</i>	In response to a question, issue or topic of discussion, at least two divergent opinions are expressed by participants in a computer-mediated discussion.
Low	<i>Disagreement</i>	Participants make direct reference to opposing positions, expressly disagreeing without attacking the opposing view, while providing evidence for the favoured position.
Medium	<i>Tension</i>	Participants attack the opposing position, offering counter- arguments that attempt to deflate the weight of opposing arguments while inflating claims for the favoured position.
Medium	<i>Antagonism</i>	Participants attack the opposing participant, using name- calling and ad hominem attacks to undermine the opposing participant's character and credibility, while focusing less on rhetorical support for the favoured position.
High	<i>Profane Antagonism</i>	Participants engage in overtly hostile, belligerent behaviour toward each other, using profanity, pompous tirades, and 'cheap shot' arguments in questionable taste, while often ignoring the original issue of divergence.

According to Dahlberg (2000) for comments to be considered rational-critical there must be an absence of emotional-volitional content. Yet, of 622 comments, out of 943 ‘abusive’ comments, coded as ‘medium intensity’ flaming (Appendix F) 505 are coded as ‘antagonistic’ and contain emotional-volitional content (Appendix L). It is Bakhtin’s (1986) supposition that it is precisely those expressive-evaluative elements that provoke interlocutors into participating in dialogic exchanges. The many different tones and viewpoints found within commenters’ responses to other posts are intrinsically dialogic, and are guided by particular speech genres.

Within the *RightMinds* forums, the most predominant speech genre associated with ‘abusive’ posts towards other contributors comprises two elements, (1) the structure of comments based on the content of the utterance, and (2) the style and tone of those comments. Commenters engaged in ‘abusive’ posts address one another in three standardised ways, providing a generic form of commenter responses. The ‘block quote’ is used when commenters wish to quote, and respond to, an entire comment within their own (Vivien, Comment 78⁶⁹), secondly, commenters make partial reference to, or quote elements of, the other’s post and incorporate them into their response (Had Enough, Comment 68⁷⁰), thirdly, commenters address the recipient without directly referring to, or quoting, the utterance to which they are responding (Jack, Comment 166⁷¹) as shown in Figure 8.

⁶⁹ ‘Jobs, Welfare and how the BBC went into Battle for the Socialist Workers’, Melanie Phillips, 26.02.12

⁷⁰ ‘Economic Crisis, a falling Political Class and the Spectre of the 1930s Style Extremism across Europe’, Stephen Glover, 12.04.12

⁷¹ ‘The Wrong War in the Wrong Place. Every day we linger there means more lives wasted’, Max Hastings, 08.03.12

Fig. 8: Three standardised ‘abusive’ comments within *RightMinds* forums

	Article	Comment	Common Conventions
1.	‘Jobs, Welfare and how the BBC went into Battle for the Socialist Workers’, Melanie Phillips, 26.02.12	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. genuine sick and disabled people are having their benefit cut. some are feeling suicidal...this isnt about being left wing this is nasty, callous. clause 54 will reveal all. – PATRIOTIC... 2. name one genuine sick and disabled person who has had benefit cuts? 3. You British cut your finger and think that makes you disabled and or a victim. 4. Drag yourselves into the 21st century of responsibility...until you can do that you will remain the cesspit of Europe. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Condescension 2. Rhetorical question 2. ‘you’ as insult 3. Patronising
2.	‘Economic Crisis, a falling Political Class and the Spectre of the 1930s Style Extremism across Europe’, Stephen Glover, 12.04.12	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wish we had a Jean-Luc Melenchon.....- Cesca..... 2. Cesca, please wake up...Camagoon, is a raving lefty... 3. He is NOT a Conservative. 4. Here is the agenda I suspect they are following; Creation of racial offences... Teach sex...to children... Undermining...schools...immigration...Promotion of excessive drinking...Dependency upon...benefits...Unreliable legal system...Control of media...Encourage breakdown of family. 5. Got the message yet? Anything ring true? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wishful thinking 2. Condescension 3. Capital letters denote shouting 4. Condescension 5. Patronising
3.	‘Cameron Made the Weather at the Last EU Summit. Now he seems to be in Retreat’, Nick Wood, 30.01.12	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. George from Durham.... 2. For your information. I do not agree with sending our brave men and women to 3. ANY god forsaken dirt hole where the population are as welcoming as trap door spiders. 4. I have lost family in Iraq...Friends in Afghanistan so please don't preach to me about loss or being comfortable. 5. As for why our people are in Afghanistan? Well, if you need to be told, then what would be the point? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Condescension 2. ‘Your’ as insult 3. Capitalisation denotes shouting 4. Condescension 5. Patronising

Contributors demonstrate a variety of critical conventions within their comments such as using ‘you’ to form part of an insult (Spertus, 1997) addressing the other in the third person, and containing a great deal of hostility. Comments are often sarcastic and contain feigned emotional responses, and are regularly accompanied by capitalised letters, understood as shouting in online debates, and the excessive use of exclamation and/or question marks (Fayard & DeSanctis, 2006).

Present data reveals that of the 1,231 comments coded under ‘discursive inclusion and equality’ 943 are recorded as ‘abusive’. Of those, 622 contributors engage in ‘medium intensity’ flaming, 295 in ‘low intensity’ flaming and 26 in ‘high intensity’ flaming (Appendix F). A proportion of those comments are addressed to other commenters comprising 195 ‘medium intensity’ flames, 51 ‘low intensity’ flames and 8 ‘high intensity’ flames (Appendix L). In some cases, it could be argued that the use of ‘abusive’ comments appears to result in the recipient leaving the forum, though this seems to depend on the severity of the flame. High intensity flames usually comprise single comments, containing a strong element of personal attacks and/or insults in the form of ‘profane antagonism’ (Thompson & Foulger, 1996:229). One such example can be found in a forum following an article on the protest on austerity outside St Paul’s Cathedral⁷²:

Bill @ Bob Daman, Extract 1:

“The occupiers are just fools looking for something for nothing. They are pie-eyedhippie fools that smell. Evict them...their 15 minutes is up”...- Bob Daman
You’ve obviously thought long and hard before posting that comment, so I hope it didn’t hurt too much. I gather the Chinese own 36% of Federal debt, so I’ve always wondered what states you might give them to settle up and balance your books. Alaska is probably worth a bit, and giving them some of the redneck states might have a certain whimsical quality. You’ve screwed your own country, trickle down economics has been a disaster for you, so don’t expect anyone to take you seriously loser (Emphasis added, Comment 7⁷³).

⁷² Whilst the subject of the comments do not form part of the analysis, it is necessary for the general content to be known so that evidence of discursive inclusion and equality can be identified.

⁷³ ‘The St Paul’s Protest is becoming a Problem. But it’s one of the City’s Own Making’, George Pitcher, 21.11.11

Bill's comment is strongly antagonistic, condescending and sarcastic, consisting of a belligerent attack on Bob Daman's views. He unleashes a pompous tirade against the economic state of affairs in the US using it to take 'cheap shots' at Bob Daman's position. He uses profanity to accuse Bob and his countrymen of 'screwing' their own country and concludes with a personal insult. As with other recipients of high intensity flames, Bob Daman does not respond to this comment and ceases to participate in the forum. As such, high intensity flames may affect equality of contributors by deterring commenters from posting their views. Whilst these types of comment are limited within the present data, their inclusion appears to have strong repercussions on their recipients.

In contrast, a typical example of a low intensity flame, which consists of 'divergence' and/or 'disagreement' (Thompson & Foulger, 1996:229), comes from a forum following an article on benefits in the UK:

Chris @ Robert, Extract 1:

"my local Tesco taken on 20 new staff for the holiday season not one was offered a job at the end of holiday season they promise a possibility they be some permanent jobs" – Robert.

Someone I know was one of about 20 taken on for the 2010 Christmas rush by the local branch of a large retail chain (not Tesco). He was the only one kept on after Christmas, got a couple of promotions within the store, and has recently been moved to another of their stores in a full-time management position. It can work, if you're suitable. Perhaps your local Tesco didn't have any jobs going after the holiday season ended, in which case when they do have some vacancies those 20 should be at the head of the queue as they've worked there before (Emphasis added, Comment 89⁷⁴).

Chris' comment can be regarded as 'divergent' from Robert's and contains an element of 'disagreement' in that Robert contends temporary staff are not taken on as permanent, whereas Chris argues that they are. Chris focuses on presenting facts which are oppositional but not 'abusive'. Indeed, he attempts to rationalise the reasons why Tesco chose not to take on permanent staff after Christmas, arguing that common sense would dictate that those 'temporary' staff should be first in line for any future permanent jobs. These types of 'low

⁷⁴ 'Fight for the Right to lie in bed all day', Richard Littlejohn, 21.02.12

intensity' flames largely comprise single responses to the views of others, and are in evidence when commenters engage in debates on a limited basis. As such, whilst this low level of 'flaming' would potentially encourage rational-critical debates; there is very little evidence of it within the forums.

Medium intensity flames comprise two levels of intensity, 'tension' and 'antagonism'. Commenters react to such comments in one of two ways; leaving the forum (measured by commenters posting no further comments) or responding with a similar level of flaming intensity. In the following example Halo responds to Baz's response to an article concerning the apparent resurgence in popularity of the Labour Party:

Baz, Extract 1:

There are millions of voters out there who vote labour just like the past generations of their families did. If you cut their heads off you would see the words labour through their necks, just like the lettering inside a stick of Blackpool rock. They have no idea about finance, and had no idea how bad things really were when Labour left after the last election. They don't realise that we were on the brink and the government would now be borrowing money at interest rates currently being imposed on Spain. Why should they care, they live for today, save nothing and know how to squeeze out every last penny from the welfare system. It's the rest of us who want to see change and get angry when we don't see it, it's the rest of us that get taxed to the hilt so the welfare checks can pay for their mobiles and 3D tv's. It's the rest of us that switch sides when our party fails us, Labour are not getting more voters, it's the rest of us that's deserting the Tories and making Labour look good (Comment 99⁷⁵).

Halo @ Baz, Extract 2:

Baz...typical right-wing rant your comments are insidious, mendacious, erroneous, pathetic and ignorant. Immature people like you generalise and demonise without researching facts. Tax evasion which is fraud if you don't know is the major problem and costs billions each year (Emphasis added, Comment 102⁷⁶).

Halo's comment to Baz is 'antagonistic'. She uses name-calling and personal attacks in an apparent attempt to undermine his character and credibility, with strongly condescending overtones. Halo uses limited counterarguments to criticise Baz's views instead relying on abuse and personal insults. Baz posts no further comments to this forum.

⁷⁵ 'Don't be fooled by resurgent Labour. They would soon send us the way of Greece', Simon Heffer, 26.05.12

⁷⁶ Ibid.

As such, medium intensity flames may stop commenters from participating in debates, particularly through the process of ‘curbing’, in which participants attempt to suppress or prevent another contributor from raising issues, or voicing their opinions within online forums (Graham & Wright, 2014). However, as in the example below, medium intensity flames can act as a catalyst for commenters to continue engaging in debates.

The following extract comprises an exchange between two commenters on a forum following an article on the ‘harsh’ sentence given to a young man, who drove his car whilst intoxicated to try to prevent the theft of a quad bike. Stu demonstrates ‘tension’ by attacking John Smith’s comment offering counter-arguments designed to reduce the strength of his views, whilst increasing the strength of his own. His tone is patronising and ‘antagonistic’ demonstrated when he refers to John Smith as an ‘armchair expert’ who knows ‘nothing’ about the law. He uses these attacks in an apparent attempt to undermine John Smith’s arguments, and to cast doubt on the credibility of his views. He uses capitalised letters to emphasise his point, with capitalisation considered to denote shouting or aggression within online debates (Ziegele et al, 2014:1118):

Stu @ John Smith, Extract 1:

“Of course the police could have secured him in the back of the vehicle and Then chased after the thieves, as well, couldn't they” - John Smith.
So they can just disregard both section 30 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (arrested person must be taken directly to a police station) and sections 6 and 7 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 (which governs breathalyser procedures). I just LOVE these armchair experts who pontificate on how the police should operate without the foggiest idea of what the law require (Emphasis added, Comment 29⁷⁷).

In his response, John Smith ‘antagonistically’ attacks Stu’s position and refers to him in the ‘third person’, which can be used ironically, but can also be used with the intention to be insulting (Yule 1996:11). He discredits Stu’s arguments by suggesting he has not taken all circumstances into account and patronises him for being ‘robotic’, insinuating a sense of

⁷⁷ ‘Talk About Adding Insult to Injury’, Richard Littlejohn, 19.08.11

‘unfeeling’ on his part. He suggests a scenario in which Stu would prefer a ‘discretionary’ approach, discrediting his position and patronising his adherence to ‘procedure’.

John Smith @ Stu, Extract 2:

STU...represents all that's wrong with our right-on PC culture when he writes in from his Swedish bolt-hole to assure us of the correct police procedures apparent here! What he hasn't taken into account is any discretion that the police can use in differing circumstance...But let's take an example to show how STU's robotic adherence to "procedure" could be, when certain circumstances might warrant a more thoughtful approach? Let's say that Stu was being beaten...by some gang just down the road from that parked-up police car? That young guy with the drink problem then rolls up to the plod to tell them of Stu's plight, but of course, following Stu's assertion, those plod would then say. "tough luck", but we've got an Apparent drunk-driver to persecute - "procedure, you know!" I'm sure Stu would agree! (Emphasis added, Comment 45, ibid).

Stu addresses John Smith directly, with a patronising tone, demonstrating ‘tension’ by arguing that the failure of the Police to act would endanger the public to whom the Police have a responsibility. His comment becomes ‘antagonistic’ when discrediting John Smith’s views on what the Police ‘ought’ to have done with the drink driver, with his tone becoming condescending when highlighting the illegality of John Smith’s suggestion:

Stu @ John Smith, Extract 3:

John Smith...a drunk driver is a real and immediate threat to public safety. If the police encounter a drunk driver and fail to act, then they exposing not just the public to danger, but also themselves to all manner of legal and disciplinary consequences... In some respects, the law does not afford discretion. Your suggestion that the police could simply secure the arrested driver in the back of a police car while pursuing thieves is...not just contrary to procedure - it is illegal. Of course, in dire circumstances...the police would have to consider priorities, but this is not such a case. What the police should have done - and possibly tried to do...was to summon assistance from colleagues in other vehicles to pursue the thieves while conveying the driver to the police station as the law requires (Emphasis added, Comment 68, ibid).

John Smith again ‘antagonistically’ refers to Stu in the third-person in a condescending tone, mocking his concession that there are cases when the Police ‘ought’ to use their discretion. He condescendingly mocks Stu’s suggestion that other Police officers could have been asked to attend, apparently attacking his character and credibility by telling him to ‘get real’, and basing his attacks on the comment of another contributor before insulting him.

John Smith@ Stu, Extract 4:

It seems STU...is having a re-think after my suggestion that had he been the victim of a crime that was being reported to nearby police by some helpful citizen, by conceding that, well, those police might now well be justified in exercising some discretion in His case...And when STU suggests that maybe those police could have radioed their mates...to chase those thieves...let's hope he was keeping a straight face, especially if he has read all those postings...reporting thefts and having to wait days for a call-do get real, Stu!...But there again after reading the posting of JAK MEETIKLATIN who, as it seems is an acquaintance of STU's, then His comments confirm that, after serving in a shop, STU then joins the police...thus becoming part of the same robotic, police "service"...uttering all that banality about "procedure"! (Emphasis added, Comment 93, *ibid*).

This exchange comprises medium intensity flames, as do others on the forums. Despite the ‘abusive’ nature of the posts, commenters are not deterred from participating in such debates. Therefore, Dahlberg’s (2001) assertion that ‘abuse’ affects the equality of participants in online debates is only substantiated with regard to the apparent negative effects of ‘high’ intensity flames.

Having ascertained that comments can be deemed ‘abusive’ within the forums, I now move on to the second part of the analysis, style and intonation of utterances. Within the present data, comments coded as ‘abusive’ comprise adversarial characteristics. Of the 943 comments coded as ‘abusive’, 615 fulfil the criteria for the ‘hidden polemic’ style of utterance (Appendix L). The ‘hidden polemic’ style of utterance is highly critical and demands reference to, or quotation of, the content to which the present interlocutor is responding (Bakhtin, 1986). The highly critical characteristics of this style of utterance should satisfy Dahlberg’s (2001a) demand for rational-critical dialogue focused on reaching understanding through arguments and counterarguments. However, it is Bakhtin’s (1984b) contention that all speech is value-laden and always ascribed with affective qualities designed to provoke active responses in exploring broader world-views (Gardiner, 2004:36).

In the comments outlined above, both John Smith and Stu use the ‘hidden polemic’ style of utterance, a style that is critical of the utterances of others. Whilst the style is critical,

the intonation does not satisfy Dahlberg's (2000:75) demand for 'rational-critical' debate in which contributors present arguments and counterarguments, in which the 'force of the better argument' takes precedence. This finding is repeated across the *RightMinds* forums with 710 out of 943 'abusive' comments also being coded as expressively 'antagonistic' (Appendix L). Moreover, for Dahlberg (2001a), debates should contain exchanges of 'normatively' presented arguments supported by specific 'criticisable validity claims', which he deems necessary for commenters to achieve rational understanding, which is analysed in Chapter 5.

John Smith focuses on presenting his own views, and defending those views, rather than producing arguments and counterarguments to achieve understanding. On the contrary, Stu presents arguments and counterarguments, based on facts, to try to persuade John Smith to accept his views as a 'better argument' (Dahlberg, 2000:85). Despite this, neither commenter can be regarded as participating in 'rational-critical' debate due to the level of emotional-volitional content in their posts. In Bakhtinian (1986:85) terms, the 'expressivity' of these utterances is adversarial and can be deemed to be attempting to provoke a response, which lends itself to creating debates. In Stu's first comment he condescendingly argues there are laws governing the treatment of arrested persons, and uses emotive language to demand an answer as to John Smith's disregard. He uses capitalised letters, considered shouting in the online context, apparently attacking his credibility by labelling him an 'armchair expert' and insults him concerning his apparent 'ignorance' regarding the law.

The tone of John Smith's reply is condescending, particularly noticeable in his reference to Stu in the 'third person'. He patronisingly discredits Stu's argument using a hypothetical scenario, and uses multiple exclamation marks to add force to a sarcastic joke at Stu's expense. In his second comment, Stu's tone is condescending, particularly noticeable in his address to 'John' in the first sentence. The dangers of drink-driving are a fact, along with the legal ramifications for the Police in undertaking unlawful actions. The pronoun

‘you’ is used as a form of insult to belittle his arguments for their ‘illegality’. In his response, John Smith is sarcastic and patronising towards Stu’s arguments, condescendingly mocking his ‘faith’ in the Police. He discredits Stu’s views by referring to another commenter’s post which informed him of Stu’s ‘real’ character as a Police Officer, using it to further discredit his arguments.

Both commenters make ‘factual’ assertions within their comments, presenting arguments and counterarguments with, and without, criticisable validity claims. However, the tone of the comments contains emotional-volitional elements and therefore meet Bakhtin’s (1986:85) notion of ‘expressiveness’. In considering these ‘expressive’ elements with regard to ‘abuse’ both commenters focus on presenting and defending their own views as opposed to attempting to reach understanding. It is therefore possible that the style and tone of the comments are the impetus for the discussions, going against Dahlberg’s (2001) demand for rational-critical debate. Rather than focusing on the arguments presented, in which the ‘force of the better argument’ should prevail (Dahlberg, 2000:75), these commenters use adversarial language and provocative statements in apparent attempt to discredit and belittle the other.

Present data suggests commenters continue to participate in debates in spite of ‘abusive’ comments posted to the forums. However, such provocation could be deemed to interfere with the equality of contributors who may be goaded into giving responses rather than articulating their views on the subject of the discussion. Which is interestingly suggestive that the emotional tenor of the exchange is what leads, rather than attends the impetus to participate.

Limited ‘Monopolisation’

In contrast to prior research (Davis, 1999; Jensen, 2003) present data indicates that large numbers of comments by the same few individuals or groups are not in evidence. This

limits the potential for commenters to ‘monopolise the attention’ of other contributors. However, there are instances in which a small group of contributors are able to monopolise portions of individual forums. The number of single comments across the 25 forums totals 1,637 of 1,987 comments, with 350 multiple comments posted by 131 contributors (Appendix R). With the high number of single comments across the forums this should result in greater equality and less monopolisation (Ainsworth et al, 2005). Only a limited number of contributors on 9 of the 25 forums contribute toward ‘monopolisation’, as found in previous research (Davis, 1999; Jensen, 2003).

Present data indicates that of the 1,231 comments coded under ‘discursive inclusion and equality’, 180 are coded under ‘monopolisation’ (Appendix F). When contributors ‘monopolise’ the forums, they post a higher number than the average of 1.28 comments per contributor, with non-monopolised forums containing an average of 1.6 replies, and in monopolised forums, 9.8 replies (Appendix R). As such, when commenters ‘monopolise’ the forums, they post numerous comments to dominate the discourse largely comprising both ‘normative’ (seeking understanding and consensus) and ‘non-normative positions’ (not from a position that seeks understanding and consensus) supported by specific externally and/or internally validated criticisable validity claims⁷⁸. This could be considered as supporting Dahlberg’s (2001:123) demand for rational-critical debate in which commenters’ present arguments and counterarguments supported by specific criticisable validity claims.

However, ‘monopolised’ comments tend to be strongly adversarial, containing high levels of emotional-volitional content (Bakhtin, 1984) with 132 out of 180 comments being coded as ‘antagonistic’ under ‘expressivity’ (Appendix L). The adversarial and critical nature of ‘monopolising’ comments is further represented through 133 comments coded under the ‘hidden polemic’ style of utterance, through which commenters can be strongly

⁷⁸ ‘Normative’ and ‘non-normative’ positions and ‘Criticisable validity claims’ are analysed in Chapter 5

critical of the views of others, and take a ‘dig’ at those views. Along with strong emotional-volitional content, 141 monopolisers post ‘abusive’ comments (Appendix L), which could provoke a negative response from the recipient, including forcing them to leave the forum (Graham & Wight, 2014). John Smith posts numerous comments to the forums, and can be deemed to intentionally create ‘tension’ by posting ‘antagonistic’ comments to provoke a strong reaction (Thompson & Foulger, 1996).

To explore this further I analyse a debate on a forum following an article on alleged biased news reporting by the *BBC*, in which 10 contributors are responsible for 42 out of 101 comments in total. Key contributors are John Smith, LilyWhite and R Coxs who are responsible for 34 comments posted (Appendix S). John Smith’s attempt to monopolise the forum by posting a number of abusive comments are the catalyst for LilyWhite’s replies. This can increase the risk of commenters contributing to their own domination (Ainsworth et al, 2005). However, within the present data the assumption that greater participation and interaction, and thus a greater variety of views leads to greater equality and less monopolisation, is substantiated (Ainsworth et al, 2005). Only a limited number of contributors, on a limited number of forums contribute toward ‘monopolisation’.

In the following example John Smith’s comments, and replies to them, account for 12 comments out of 101 (Appendix S), consisting of medium intensity ‘antagonistic’ flames (Thompson & Foulger, 1996) referring to commenters in the third-person, used as a form of insult (Yule, 1996) alongside a strongly condescending tone, and patronisingly feigning joy at the news, many benefit claimants have ‘miraculously recovered’, adding emotive undertones by his overuse of exclamation marks (Fayard & DeSanctis, 2006):

John Smith:

All the posters here demanding that the Beeb become Their protest voice, when the Beeb are supposed...to offer impartial coverage, seem to forget that virtually all polling shows that over 70% of the general public support the tightening of the Benefits Industry and the confirmation that try-it-on scroungers are detected and dealt

with severely -and it seems from various early reports that thousands of these "sick" claimants have already miraculously recovered and disappeared from the ATOS re-examination invitations! Hallelujah indeed! (Emphasis added, Comment 36⁷⁹).

Whilst a number of contributors post replies, LilyWhite's challenges to John Smith's comments, and rebuttals to his replies, account for 13 comments out of the 101 that were posted (Appendix S). LilyWhite responds to this comment in five separate posts all containing references to his original comment. Her responses focus on three areas, Government figures on disability fraud, the failure of the *BBC* to challenge Government figures and defence of the sick and disabled.

In her comments LilyWhite argues that:

"Coverage of the Welfare Reform Bill have been dominated by misleading statistics about sick and disabled people being 'try-it-on scroungers'" (Comment 44,ibid) and that *"70% of the general public probably don't know that [they]...aren't scroungers at all...and [that] state fraud amongst benefits is low, 0.5% for disability benefits"* (Emphasis added, Comment 50, ibid).

She criticises the *BBC* demanding they:

"report public interest stories not ignore them entirely" (Comment 44, ibid) that they report news impartially *"according to their charter"* and that the *BBC* *"should question the press releases of the government when they disagree with official figures"* (Emphasis added, Comment 54, ibid).

She defends benefits claimants arguing that:

"the government have been caught out again and again over...the sick and disabled" (Comment 54) and asks, of the claimants who are assessed as 'fit' to work, *"if they are all try-it-on scroungers' why are they dropping dead?"* (Emphasis added, Comment 56, ibid).

John Smith demonstrates 'antagonism' by attacking LilyWhite's comment referring to her in the 'third person', which can be used ironically, but can also be used with the intention to insult (Yule 1996:11). He discredits her arguments, offering counterclaims elaborated with emotional responses indicated by feigned surprise, the use of exclamation marks (Fayard & DeSanctis, 2006) and taking a polemical 'dig' at her 'propagandising'.

⁷⁹ 'The BBC has a Duty to represent the British Nation...but is it doing so?', Sonia Poulton, 06.04.12

John Smith @ LilyWhite, Extract 6:

LILYWHITE...reports that 1,000 claimants died last year after being found fit enough to work? Would LW now tell us out of how many millions of claimants just what this figure represents in percentage terms? And would you believe it too, that many, many thousands of people also died in hospital last year, and thousands of Working people also died whilst being employed too! More realism please, and less propaganda! (Emphasis added, Comment 59, *ibid*).

LilyWhite's tone is condescending, demonstrating 'tension'. By attacking John Smith's views and offering counter-arguments, she aims to reduce the strength of his comments, whilst increasing the strength of her own. Her tone becomes patronising and 'antagonistic' arguing no disabled claimants have 'miraculously recovered'; casting doubt on his claims, further discrediting him by mockingly demanding to know why he expects a fit person to attend a fitness assessment?

LilyWhite @ John Smith, Extract 2:

The posters here want the BBC to offer impartial coverage, ignoring news stories that might upset the government of the day doesn't do that. No sick and disabled claimants have miraculously recovered, many claimants of Incapacity Benefit now ESA are short term claimants and return to work. Not attending an assessment when you are better is futile don't you think? (Emphasis added, Comment 49, *ibid*).

In his response, John Smith 'antagonistically' attacks LilyWhite's position and refers to her in the 'third person', a form of insult (Yule, 1996:11). He misrepresents her arguments, and appears to question her character and credibility by suggesting she is disingenuous, has not taken all factors into account, and she believes in 'make believe' stories, particularly those 'made-up' by sick benefit 'claimants'.

John Smith @ LilyWhite, Extract 7:

LILYWHITE...suggests that the Beeb doesn't want to carry stories that might upset the coalition! LW must have been asleep each time then, when Every Beeb news programme was vigorously slating Lansley and Cameron over the NHS... and giving unlimited air-time to Burnham & Co. to rubbish all the proposals! Where was LW then-certainly not demanding the "balance"... now thought to be required for the Benefits debate? And LW seems to believe in fairy-tales too...if it's believed that at the same time as ATOS sends an invite - some of those...claimants "recover" but don't bother to tell ATOS that - they just don't turn up! I wonder why? (Emphasis added, Comment 60, *ibid*).

In her reply, LilyWhite demonstrates ‘tension’ by attacking John Smith’s comment offering counterclaims to reduce the strength of his views, whilst increasing the strength of her own. She belittles him, patronisingly questioning his lack of information, taking a polemical ‘dig’ to discredit his negative stance on sickness benefits claimants.

LilyWhite @ John Smith, Extract 8:

John Smith...*Sick and disabled people deemed unfit for work by GP's, Consultants and DWP Doctors are then found fit under new criteria and die before being able to return to work and you don't find that at all a realistic reason for concern?* The numbers I referenced are in the article, *did you read it?* Disability fraud rate is extremely low (Emphasis added, Comment 64, *ibid*).

In this example, John Smith’s views are dominant within LilyWhite’s discourse, as are her replies in his. The lesser medium intensity flame ‘tension’ (Thompson & Foulger, 1996) can be identified, but soon become more intense, with the remainder becoming ‘antagonistic’ (Thompson & Foulger, 1996). The style and tone of the comments can also be described as ‘abusive’ in that both commenters use condescension, patronisation, and sarcasm in an apparent attempt to attack the others’ arguments, question their character and credibility and post insults. Despite this, both commenters remain in this exchange and on the forum, even after this debate has run its course. This is also true of other exchanges between contributors involved in ‘monopolised’ dialogues.

As with other research in the area of online debates, present data suggests monopolisation is more likely to occur when there are limited numbers of commenters contributing numerous comments to individual forums (Davis, 1999; Jensen, 2003). Whilst 1,637 comments out of 1,987 are single posts, limiting the extent of monopolisation, nine forums are ‘monopolised’ for limited periods of time by small groups of contributors (Appendix R). However, the low level of ‘monopolisation’ within the present data disproves Dahlberg’s (2006) concern over its prevalence, which also contrasts with other research on monopolisation in online debates (Da Silva, 2013).

The Lack of ‘Control’ on the Agenda

According to Himelboim et al (2009), commenters who attract messages play an important role in shaping the agenda in online political discussion. For contributors to control the agenda, their views must be presented and replied to consistently by a number of commenters and it is those most able to evoke contributions from others that “play a unique social role as the introducers of discussion topics” (Himelboim et al, 2009:771-2). They also found that some individuals attract a disproportionate number of replies to their comments, and that only a limited number of messages and authors receive replies (Himelboim et al, 2009). These findings are comparable to the present data. Furthermore, commenters who provoke replies often do so due to their lack of civility and rational argumentation in their posts (Constantinescu & Tedesco, 2007; Lee, 2005, Singer & Ashman, 2009). These findings emulate the form and content of *RightMinds* forums that are ‘monopolised’.

Dahlberg (2001a) argues that ‘control of the agenda’ is a subtle process in which commenters infuse their own particular style and agenda into online debates. However, it has been established that debates between contributors are abusive and hostile, allowing contributors none of the ‘subtlety’ that Dahlberg (2001a) suggests. On the contrary, of the 254 posts coded under ‘abusive’ comments when addressed to other commenters, 100 comments are coded under ‘control of the agenda’, with 102 coded under ‘monopolisation’, indicating that ‘abusive’ commenters who ‘monopolise’ the forums are also able to ‘control the agenda’ (Appendix L). The high degree of emotional-volitional content in these combined comments is demonstrated by 930 out of 1,231 comments coded under ‘abuse’, ‘monopolisation’ and ‘control of the agenda’ being coded as ‘antagonistic’ under ‘expressivity’ (Appendix L), which goes against Dahlberg’s (2001) demand for ‘subtlety’. Out of 25 forums 9 contained commenters who consistently presented their views and received replies by a number of contributors (Appendix R). This indicates that ‘control of the

agenda’ is not present across the *RightMinds* forums, though it can be identified within 9 individual forums. Rather than commenters ‘controlling the agenda’ in a subtle indirect way, ‘control’ is achieved through ‘monopolisation’ and ‘abusive’ remarks, resulting in the style and tone of comments being significant as to the level of ‘control’ commenters’ achieve.

Exclusions and Inequalities in Comment is Free

Dahlberg (2001a) argues that external factors affect the potential for commenters to participate in online debates. External exclusions and inequalities that affect participation include gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status (Dahlberg, 2001a). Recent research suggests that these factors continue to be key predictors of Internet use (van Duersen & van Dijk, 2011; Hargittai, 2008; DiMaggio et al, 2004; Selwyn, 2004, 2006, 2007; van Dijk 2005, 2006, 2007). Present data shows that 1,660 comments are coded as being posted by male-gendered, and 390 by female-gendered contributors⁸⁰ (Appendix A). This finding is ascertained through measuring the gendered nature of pseudonyms commenters ascribed themselves e.g. ‘Richard of Birmingham’ or ‘Patricia03’ (Tang et al, 2010; Liu & Ruths, 2013). Due to the uncertainty of the actual gender of contributors, these findings cannot be considered completely representative of the numbers of male and female commenters. However, these statistics suggest that Dahlberg’s (2006) concerns over the limited numbers of women participating in online debates could have some empirical basis in the *Comment is Free* forums.

However, with regard to the recipients of ‘abuse’, whilst scholars have identified women as one of the key receivers of ‘abuse’ within online forums (Megarry, 2014), within the present data, male-gendered contributors received 715 ‘abusive’ comments in comparison to 229 female-gendered contributors (Appendix T). Whilst these findings must be viewed with caution, given that the real identities of contributors have not been verified, they suggest

⁸⁰ The remaining 5,188 pseudonyms were coded as non-gendered

that the extent of abusive remarks aimed at women are less prevalent within the *Comment is Free* forums, in contrast to previous research (Megarry, 2014).

Unlike in *RightMinds* forums, it is not standard practice for a contributor to *Comment is Free* to reveal their location. Whilst some contributors allude to their nationality or country of origin through their username such as ‘Voice of America’ or ‘Welsh Penguin’, or specifically refer to their location during the course of a forum “I live in Egypt...Egypt is a fantastic country to live in” (Comment 193⁸¹), these elucidations are not substantial enough to undertake an analysis of contributors’ locations in respect of Internet penetration, nor the effects on distribution of comments by men and women. As with *RightMinds*, contributors to *Comment is Free* rarely reveal their racial or ethnic identities, or their socio-economic status limiting the capacity to analyse the level of engagement of these strata.

The Acceptability of ‘Abuse’

As with commenters on the *RightMinds* forums, contributors to *Comment is Free* respond to the comments of others. Of the 6,898 comments coded under ‘referentially semantic content’, 3,994 are in direct response to the content of other commenters’ posts (Appendix J), with 3,251 of those being coded as ‘abusive’ (Appendix M). As with Richardson and Stanyer’s (2011) research on the online comments sections of British tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, whilst commenters on *The Guardian* participate in frequent exchanges of views, comments largely comprise ad hominem attacks on other contributors. It is the effects of such ‘abuse’ along with commenters ‘monopolising’ the attention of others and ‘controlling’ the agenda that Dahlberg (2001a) argues is antithetical to discursive inclusion and equality within online debates. Dahlberg (2001:198) suggests that a significant number of online debates have been subject to abusive postings being the most “rudimentary way in which some individuals or groups come to silence others”. Common strategies used

⁸¹ ‘The problem with Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood is not Sharia’, Sara Korshid, 21.01.12

by contributors include abusive postings, often in the form of ‘flaming’ but also comments designed to belittle and humiliate others (Dahlberg, 2001a).

Yet, recent research suggests that the perceived acceptability of aggressive behaviours in online political discussions is linked to the intention to engage in such behaviours (Zhen et al, 2011; Hutchens et al, 2014). In their study of flaming behaviour in political blogs, Hutchens et al (2014) highlight the importance of normative beliefs of what constitutes ‘acceptable’ behaviour in online communication, and following Upadhyay (2010) that the prevalence of flaming in online contexts may lead contributors to see such aggressive behaviour as ‘acceptable’. However, they note that the relationship between acceptability of flaming and the intention to flame varies by verbal aggression (Hutchens et al, 2014:1206). As such, different levels of flaming intensity are likely to affect flaming intention, and the level of ‘abusive’ posts aimed at contributors.

Present data indicates that 4,199 comments are coded as ‘abusive’, with 2,560 comprising ‘medium intensity’ flames (Appendix G). Therefore, a large proportion of these comments cannot be considered as meeting Dahlberg’s (2000) rational-critical criteria. Conversely, Bakhtin (1986) argues it is precisely those expressive-evaluative elements that provoke interlocutors into participating in dialogic exchanges. Therefore, it is necessary to not only identify ‘abuse’, ‘monopolisation’ and ‘control of the agenda’ in Dahlbergian terms, but to analyse how contributors go about articulating their views in Bakhtinian terms. These intrinsically dialogic exchanges between contributors incorporate many different tones and viewpoints, and are guided by particular speech genres within the *Comment is Free* forums.

Within the present data, the predominant speech genre is that of dialogic interactions between commenters and comprises two elements, (1) the structure of comments based on the content of the utterance, and (2) the style and tone of those comments. Commenters include a great deal of sarcasm, and patronisation in their posts which is often accompanied by feigned

emotional evaluative responses, and the use of punctuation marks to emphasise the emotive element of commenters' responses⁸². Commenters regularly refer to others in the third person, and refer to others as 'you', which is considered to form part of an insult, particularly when connected to statements that are deemed to be condescending and hostile (Graham, 2010). Commenters engaged in 'abusive' posts address one another in three standardised ways, providing a generic form in which they express their views. First, using the 'block quote' function to quote, and respond to, another's comment in full (HarryTheHorse, Comment 195⁸³), secondly, partially incorporating the utterance of the other into their own (Haru, Comment 122⁸⁴), thirdly, addressing the recipient without directly quoting their utterance (WH1952, Comment 446⁸⁵) as shown in Figure 9.

⁸² The ways in which commenters construct their arguments, as 'dogmatic assertions' or 'normative positions' supported by 'criticisable validity claims', are analysed in Chapter 5.

⁸³ 'Students will continue to fight to keep education a public service', Michael Chessum, 19.09.11

⁸⁴ 'Just a Phase? No, the student protest over fees are worthy of respect', Stefan Collini, 14.03.12

⁸⁵ 'Being a Slut, to my mind, was mostly fun – wearing and doing what you liked', Suzanne Moore, 14.05.11

Fig. 9: Three standardised ‘abusive’ comments within *Comment is Free* forums

	Forum	Comment	Common Conventions
1.	‘Students will continue to fight to keep education a public service’, Michael Chessum, 19.09.11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “Like it or not, that is the view of many people, including those that have worked within the public Sector” 2. Yes, all those nurses and teachers. Damn them, the lazy good for nothing swine. 3. “If the public sector was run with the same ruthless efficiency as...private sector firms...we might just see...services...delivered more effectively?” 4. Ruthless efficiency, eh? 5. Reduced salaries and terms and conditions, with the private operator keeping the excess, is I think what you actually mean. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Condescending 2. Patronising use of profanity 3. Condescension 4. Sarcastic feigned agreement 5. Patronising
2.	‘Just a Phase? No, the student protest over fees are worthy of respect’, Stefan Collini, 17.03.12	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Response to ToryPartyNastyParty, "the abolition of existing fees was an explicit manifesto commitment of the Liberal Democrats" 2. I can't believe idiots like you are still peddling this..The Liberal Democrats are a 3. MINORITY PARTNER in a COALITION GOVERNMENT... 4. Seriously, what part of that is hard to understand? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.Statement of fact 2. ‘You’ insult 3. Capital letters denotes shouting 4. Personal insult
3.	‘Being a slut, to my mind, was mostly fun – wearing and doing what you liked’, Suzanne Moore, 14.05.11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unjustlytreated2, Not me getting your stuff deleted mate, 2. if it were up to me I'd leave it up so everyone can see what a prat you are. 3. Animals don't stand around discussing rape because they can't... We are somewhat better equipped, though by how much...might turn out to be a matter for debate... 4. Sorry mate, 5. you can't deny your humanity so you'll have to put up with these discussions on the morality of it all. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sarcastic ‘mate’ 2. Profanity 3. Inferring stupidity 4. Ironic over-politeness 6. Condescending

Within the *Comment is Free* forums 4,199 comments are coded as ‘abusive’, 3,240 are addressed to other contributors and of those, 67 contributors engaged in ‘high intensity’ flaming, 1,228 in ‘low intensity’ flaming and 1,932 in ‘medium intensity’ flaming (Appendix M), though these flames are often expressed through an amalgam of low and medium intensity flames (Thompson & Foulger, 1996). In some cases, the use of ‘abusive’ comments could be regarded as a potential reason why the recipient leaves the forum, though this seems to depend on the severity of the flame. High intensity flames usually comprise single comments, containing personal attacks and/or insults in the form of ‘profane antagonism’ (Thompson & Foulger, 1996:229). One such example can be found in a forum following an article on Russians’ protesting against unfair elections⁸⁶:

Rufushound @ Minsredmash, Extract 1:

Response to minsredmash...*If you play the critic why pick and choose? And your opinion is what, nothing, no more or less important than mine or anyone else. You jealous, I doubt it. That means you would envy what others have and seeing as you're so perfect and lacking in any humility you know you could never be jealous of the likes of me. We all must bow to your intelligence, unlike the rest of the World you have superior cognitive ability. BUT... if been such a one person power house of superior intelligence means I'm an up my own asshole moronic knob-jockey without any ability other than agree with the people who line my pockets, I'm happily accept my position of the lower rungs of intelligence* (Emphasis added, Comment 59⁸⁷).

Rufushound’s comment is condescending, sarcastic and antagonistic, consisting of a belligerent attack on Minsredmash’s views. He pompously mocks his ‘superior cognitive ability’ using it to take ‘cheap shots’ at Minsredmash’s position. He uses profanity to rhetorically refer to Minsredmash as an ‘asshole moronic knob-jockey’ concluding his comment with a personal insult over the ‘type’ of person Minsredmash appears to be. As with other recipients of high intensity flames, Minsredmash does not respond to this comment and ceases to contribute to the forum (measured by him posting no further comments to the

⁸⁶ Whilst the subject of the comments do not form part of the analysis, it is necessary for the general content to be known so that evidence of discursive inclusion and equality can be identified.

⁸⁷ ‘Russia is protesting against unfair elections, not against Putin’, Ekaterina Zatuliveter, 14.12.11

forum). As such, high intensity flames appear to affect the inclusiveness and equality of contributors by deterring others from posting their views. Whilst these types of comments are limited within the present data, the repercussions of commenters receiving such comments appear to be significant.

In contrast, a typical example of a low intensity flame, which consists of ‘divergence’ and/or ‘disagreement’ (Thompson & Foulger, 1996:229), comes from a forum following an article on how democratic Libya’s opposition party is:

Gluesniffer @ Personalstart, Extract 1:

“We’re obviously confusing two very different ends of the private sector here - directors, consultants, PFI bloodsuckers, shareholders, etc with ordinary private sector workers.”

Clearly. Most private sector workers are not any of these people.

“The sum of £9,000 per annum may be less than some people shove up their nose before breakfast but for most people it is a frightening sum of debt to take on at a time when they have no money, no assets and no income.”

You’re calling it debt as if it is the same as mortgage debt or debt on a car or something. It isn’t. It’s more like a tax on people who go to university and go on to be successful. £9000 a year at the terms offered is peanuts, particularly if you are doing a worthwhile course. Even if you’re just doing something that interests you, it’s still peanuts, the rate of repayment is so low that anyone would be a fool to let it worry them (Emphasis added, Comment 264⁸⁸).

Gluesniffer’s comment can be regarded as ‘divergent’ from Personalstart’s and contains an element of ‘disagreement’ in that Personalstart contends that £9000 per annum is a ‘frightening’ debt to most people with ‘no money, no assets, no income’, whereas Gluesniffer argues that it is not a ‘debt’ at all. He attempts to explain that the fees should not be considered to be a ‘debt’ but a ‘tax’ on university students, and that students can pursue a subject of interest with a low rate of repayment, regardless of financial background. Unlike in *RightMinds* forums, these types of ‘low intensity’ flames comprise responses to other contributors engaging in debates, and within single responses to the views of others. As standalone comments ‘low intensity’ flames potentially encourage rational-critical debates;

⁸⁸ ‘Students will continue to fight to keep education a public service’, Michael Chessum, 19.09.11

however, present data reveals of 1,557 ‘low intensity’ flames (Appendix G), 823 are coded as expressively ‘antagonistic’ (Appendix M). As such, the interjection of emotional-volitional content extinguishes the potential for ‘rational-critical’ debates to form in these exchanges.

Medium intensity flames comprise two levels of intensity, ‘tension’ and ‘antagonism’. Commenters largely react to such comments in one of two ways; leaving the forum, or responding with a similar level of flaming intensity. In the following example Truehistory responds to Euangray’s comment:

Truehistory @ Euangray, Extract 1:

euangray Don't talk rubbish on public forums! I just went through one of your comments-

"I believe there have been only two centuries in the past two millennia where China was NOT the world's largest economy."

It is LUDICROUS to even suggest that. I just did some research and guess what - INDIA had the world's largest economy from the first to the 18th century. There are a few other reports/studies that say that China only had the world's largest economy for 2 centuries out of the past 20 centuries - For the rest of the time, it was INDIA. INDIA had the world's largest economy for 18 of the past 20 centuries! It wasn't China! So, stop manipulating historical facts and stop spewing nonsense on a public forum! (Emphasis added, Comment 116⁸⁹).

TrueHistory’s comment to Euangray is ‘antagonistic’. She uses personal attacks in an apparent attempt to undermine his credibility with strongly condescending overtones. She uses facts to criticise Euangray’s views attacking his character. The tone of TrueHistory’s comment is intensely condescending and contains a strong, personal attack against the recipient. She uses capitalised letters, considered shouting in the online context, and uses multiple exclamation marks to add force to, and express her frustration with, Euangray’s claims (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Fayard & DeSanctis, 2006). Euangray posts not further comments to this forum. So, medium intensity flames appear to have the propensity to stop commenters from participating in debates, particularly through a process known as ‘curbing’

⁸⁹ ‘China is deeply flawed’, Jonathan Fenby, 05.04.12

(Graham & Wright, 2014). Yet, as in the example below, medium intensity flames can encourage commenters to continue engaging in debates.

The following extract comprises part of an exchange between two commenters on a forum following an article on the reported lack of social, cultural and religious freedoms in Turkey. KrustytheKlown demonstrates ‘tension’ by attacking Anotherdayolder’s comment offering counter-arguments designed to reduce the strength of her views, whilst increasing the strength of his own. His tone is patronising and uses these attacks in an apparent attempt to undermine Anotherdayolder’s arguments, and to cast doubt on the credibility of her views:

KrustytheKlown @ Anotherdayolder, Extract 1:

anotherdayolder "It depends on exactly what you mean by 'henchmen'?"

Would you consider being the head of Libya's 'justice' system sufficient qualifcaiton for henchman-hood? Isn't that the position held by the 'leader' of the NTC until only a few months ago?

"With regards to an "interesting history" - I think you'll...find that Mrs Gaddafi and...the 'little' Gaddafi offspring were blood-sucking leeches more than happy to feed voraciously and obscenely off Libya's wealth"

I've no doubt they were, but since when is this an international crime? Oh, and remind me again about which Arab nations are actively supporting this war. No nepotism in Qatar , the UAE or Saudi Arabia? ...Paragons of egalitarian socialism all? (Emphasis added, Comment 70⁹⁰).

In her reply, Anotherdayolder attacks KrustytheKlown’s position, discrediting his assertions by patronisingly demanding proof for his claims. She condescendingly re-states her argument, using profanity to emphasise her point. She accuses him of hypocrisy, attacking his character, by referring to his contradictory attitude of ‘screaming’ for the prosecution of ‘high ranking’ officials, but defending ‘a bunch of crooks’ (the Gaddafi family):

Anotherdayolder @ KrustytheKlown, Extract 2:

KrustytheKlown "Would you consider being the head of Libya's 'justice' system sufficient qualifcaiton for henchman-hood?"

...I know exactly who Mustafa Abdel Jalil is - and the stuff...[saying] he was a full-on Gaddafi lackey...If you have some information to show conclusively that he was, then I would love to see it.

“And what about the other leading members of the NTC...”

⁹⁰ ‘Turkey is not a free country’, Joshua Surtees, 01.05.11

I repeat: The majority of Libyans in government, civil administration and the military during Gaddafi's despotic rule could be defined as 'henchmen'...And that's a fuck of a lot of people.

"Oh, and remind me again about which Arab nations are actively supporting this war. No nepotism in Qatar, the UAE or Saudi Arabia? Paragons of egalitarian socialism all?"

I see – so...you would likely be screaming for the detention and trial of high-ranking leeches [but] when it comes to the Gaddafi family you immediately jump to their defence... Nice bit of hypocrisy there, Krusty...Sounds to me like they're a bunch of crooks who need to be sent back to face trial (Emphasis added, Comment 81, ibid).

KrustytheKlown responds in a condescending tone, demonstrating 'tension' by criticising Anotherdayolder's credibility and character. He infers she is part of the pro-war 'brigade' who are contradictory in their attitude toward the Gaddafi regime, that she is making 'straw man' arguments, is presumptuous, and presenting weak arguments based on how things 'sound' to her as opposed to being based on 'facts':

KrustytheKlown @ Anotherdayolder, Extract 3:

anotherdayolder "Yes, I know exactly who Mustafa Abdel Jalil is - and the stuff [saying] he was a full-on Gaddafi lackey...If you have some information to show conclusively that he was, then I would love to see it."

Oh, please. Are you suggesting that this guy got to be a high ranking member of Qadhafi's govt for many years without being a yes man? ...The problem with the pro-war brigade, is that...they speak of Qadhafi's regime as uniquely awful, yet ...want to pretend that those who were an important part of it...are innocent of all wrong doing. Doesn't wash

"so...you would likely be screaming for the detention and trial of high-ranking leeches [but] when it comes to the Gaddafi family you immediately jump to their defence... Nice bit of hypocrisy there, Krusty."

Nice bit of strawmanning there. You seem to presume an awful lot. I'm not 'defending' anyone. I'm just saying that seeing as no charges have been made against any of these 4 Qadhafis, ...why do Brian and the other cheerleaders see it as a terrible crime for a country... to give them shelter?

"Sounds to me like they're a bunch of crooks who need to...face trial"

'Sounds to you' eh? Perhaps so, but what 'sounds to you' does not an extradition case make (Emphasis added, Comment 117, ibid).

Anotherdayolder uses patronising language in an apparent attempt to attack KrustytheKlown's credibility, accusing him of being defensive and resorting to 'camp ridicule'. Her attitude is condescending, demanding proof for assertions made. She accuses

KrustytheKlown of hypocrisy; sarcastically requesting he 'puur-leeze' refrains from 'that strawmanning tosh'.

Anotherdayolder@ KrustytheKlown, Extract 4:

KrustytheKlown - *Oh, please. I just love it when defensive commenters start off their ripostes with a bit of camp ridicule... Nice touch*

"Are you suggesting that this guy got to be a high ranking member of Qadhafi's govt for many years without being a yes man?"

Yes, Krusty - I most certainly am suggesting that he was no Gaddafi yes man... Of course, if you have something more conclusive to offer... then please do post it here'

"The problem with the pro-war brigade, is that... they speak of Qadhafi's regime as uniquely awful, yet... want to pretend that those who were an important part of it... are innocent of all wrong doing. Doesn't wash..."

you clearly don't know what you're talking about. And I repeat: I am surprised [you] would likely be screaming for the detention and trial of high-ranking leeches and embezzlers... but when it comes to the Gaddafi family you immediately jump to their defence... Nice bit of hypocrisy there, Krusty. And puur-leeze-don't give me any of that "strawmanning" tosh (Emphasis added, Comment 175, ibid).

Of the 4,199 'abusive' comments posted within the *Comment is Free* forums, 3,129 contributors receive 'abusive' replies (Appendix T) and 2,560 comprise 'medium intensity' flames (Appendix G). There are 20 forums in which there are numerous abusive comments posted and received (Appendix U). Therefore, as in the example above, commenters appear to be undeterred from participating in these forums despite the 'abusive' nature of the posts. This indicates that not all 'abusive' comments lead to exclusion and inequality. Whilst Thompsen & Foulger (1996:238) identified quotation of the other's comment possibly leading to a 'sharpening' of one's attack, it can be argued that contributors within *Comment is Free* largely use this function in order to keep track of arguments in progress. Therefore the style and tone of comments may be an important factor regarding the extent of 'abusive' comments within the forums.

Having ascertained that comments can be deemed 'abusive' within the forums, I now move on to the second part of the analysis, style and intonation of utterances. Of the 4,199 comments coded as 'abusive', 2,097 are coded under the 'hidden polemic' style of utterance and 1,524 are coded under the 'parodic' style of utterance (Appendix M). The 'hidden

polemic' style of utterance demands reference to, or quotation of, the content to which the present interlocutor is responding (Bakhtin, 1986) whilst the 'parodic' style of utterance (Bakhtin, 1986) is identified in comments in which the present commenter critically responds to the comments of others in a point-for-point manner, resulting in a hostile and provocative exchange of views. Bakhtin (1984b) states that all speech is value-laden, with affective qualities designed to provoke active responses (Gardiner, 2004:36). Yet, Dahlberg (2001a) argues that such emotional-volitional language is anathema to rational-critical dialogue, which focuses on reaching understanding through presenting persuasive arguments and counterarguments.

In the comments outlined above, both Anotherdayolder and KrustytheKlown use the 'parodic' style of utterance, a style that is critical of the utterances of others. Whilst the style is critical, the level of emotional-volitional content does not satisfy Dahlberg's (2000:75) demand for 'rational-critical' debate, which should comprise the exchange of arguments and counterarguments in which the 'force of the better argument' takes precedence. Moreover, of the 4,199 comments coded as 'abusive' within the *Comment is Free* forums, 3,185 are coded as expressively 'antagonistic' (Appendix M). Therefore, whilst contributors may engage in exchanges of 'normatively' presented arguments supported by specific 'criticisable validity claims'⁹¹, which Dahlberg (2001a) deems necessary for commenters to achieve 'rational' understanding, the inclusion of expressively 'antagonistic' elements is anathema to Dahlberg's (2001a) criteria.

Anotherdayolder and KrustytheKlown focus on presenting their views and defending them, though they do attempt to define terms, and elicit some understanding. Both commenters make claims and counterclaims based on facts, to try to persuade the other to accept their views. Despite this, neither commenter can be regarded as participating in

⁹¹ This is analysed in Chapter 5.

‘rational-critical’ debate due to the significant level of emotional-volitional content in their posts. In Bakhtinian (1986:85) terms, the ‘expressivity’ of these utterances is adversarial and can be deemed to be attempting to provoke a response, which lends itself to creating debates. In KrustytheKlown’s first comment he condescendingly demands agreement on who can be regarded as a ‘henchman’. He attacks Anotherdayolder’s credibility by attempting to belittle her accusations against The Gadaffis as not being tantamount to ‘international crime’, and rhetorically demands to know which Arab countries support the Libyan war, insulting her for her apparent ignorance of the political structure of those countries.

The tone of Anotherdayolder’s reply is condescending. She patronisingly discredits KrustytheKlown’s argument by claiming she would ‘love’ to see evidence for his claims. She uses profanity to strengthen her claims, mocking his support for the Gaddafis, attacking his character by accusations of hypocrisy and lack of respect for legal process. In his second comment, KrustytheKlown’s tone is condescending, particularly noticeable in his opening address of ‘Oh, please’. He argues that that Mustafa Abdel Jalil is a Gaddafi ‘yes man’, and criticises the hypocrisy of commentators who criticise the ‘old’ regime and defend the ‘new’ when it comprises the same individuals. The pronoun ‘you’ is used as a form of insult to belittle Anotherdayolder’s ‘strawmanning’ and presumptuousness. KrustytheKlown appears to attack Anotherdayolder’s credibility and character by implying she is a ‘cheerleader’ for those who believe the Gaddafis should be penalised when no charges have been brought against them. He concludes his reply by patronisingly disparaging Anotherdayolder’s claims, mocking her for lacking in strong arguments to make her case.

In her response, Anotherdayolder is sarcastic and condescending towards KrustytheKlown’s arguments. She refers to KrustytheKlown in the ‘third person’, which can be used for ironic purposes but can also be used with the intention to insult someone (Yule, 1996:11). She patronisingly mocks his ‘defensive riposte’ accusing him of resorting to ‘camp

ridicule'. The tone of Anotherdayolder's response is condescending, particularly noticeable in her address 'Yes, Krusty' in the first sentence of Extract 4, line five. She discredits KrustytheKlown's views by mockingly demanding a 'conclusive' argument, attacking his 'hypocrisy' and demanding he refrains from 'strawmanning'.

Both commenters make 'factual' assertions within their comments, presenting arguments and counterarguments with, and without, criticisable validity claims. However, the tone of the comments contains emotional-volitional elements and therefore meet Bakhtin's (1986:85) notion of 'expressiveness'. In considering these 'expressive' elements with regard to 'abuse' both commenters focus on presenting and defending their own views as opposed to attempting to reach understanding. It is therefore possible that the style and tone of the comments are the impetus for the discussions, going against Dahlberg's (2001) demand for rational-critical debate. Rather than focusing on the arguments presented, in which the 'force of the better argument' should prevail (Dahlberg, 2000:75), these commenters use adversarial language and provocative statements to discredit and belittle the other. As with Harasim's (1993) study, present data suggests commenters continue to participate in debates in spite of 'abusive' comments. However, such provocation could be deemed to interfere with the equality of contributors who may be goaded into giving responses rather than articulating their views on the subject of the discussion.

Collective 'Monopolisation'

As with *RightMinds* forums, present data indicates that large numbers of comments by the same few individuals or groups are not in evidence across *Comment is Free* forums. This could be deemed to limit commenters' ability to 'monopolise the attention' of other contributors. However, there are instances in which groups of contributors are able to monopolise individual forums. These instances comprise commenters posting a higher number of comments than the average 2.18 per commenter and a high number of replies

(Appendix U). When commenters ‘monopolise’ the forums, they post numerous comments to dominate the discourse largely comprising both ‘normative’ and ‘non-normative’ positions supported by specific externally and/or internally validated criticisable validity claims⁹². This could be considered as supporting Dahlberg’s (2001:123) demand for rational-critical debate in which commenters present arguments and counterarguments to support their views. However, of the 3,796 comments coded as ‘monopolised’ (Appendix G), 2,906 are addressed to other commenters, with 2,481 coded as expressively ‘antagonistic’, containing strong emotional-volitional content and adversarial characteristics (Appendix M).

The adversarial and critical nature of ‘monopolising’ comments is largely represented through 1,630 comments coded under the ‘hidden polemic’ style of utterance (Bakhtin, 1986) and 1,144 coded as ‘parodic’ (Appendix M). Along with strong emotional-volitional content, 2,685 monopolisers resort to posting ‘abusive’ comments in what could be regarded as an attempt to provoke a negative response, such as forcing others to leave the forum (Graham & Wight, 2014). Such comments cannot be considered as meeting Dahlberg’s (2001) ‘rational-critical’ criterion.

Of the 40 *Comment is Free* forums, 5 contain <50 comments, 8 contain 50-100 comments, 12 contain 100-200 comments and 15 contain >200 comments (Appendix D). The number of single comments across the 40 forums totals 2,101, with 1,081 contributors being responsible for 4,826 multiple comments (Appendix U). With numerous commenters posting large quantities of comments, there is an increased risk that commenters can contribute to their own domination (Ainsworth et al, 2005). Out of the 40 forums, 17 contain comments monopolised by fewer contributors, posting more than the average 4.43 comments (Appendix U). With 4,826 comments being posted by multiple commenters across the forums this could result in less equality and more monopolisation, which is comparable to

⁹² See Chapter 5

prior research (Davis, 1999; Jensen, 2003). Yet, with 2,101 comments comprising single posts, they can contribute toward equality and reduce monopolisation, albeit to a limited extent (Ainsworth et al, 2005).

Unlike *RightMinds* forums, *Comment is Free* forums are not dominated by any individual commenter⁹³, though some commenters monopolise the attention of individual forums. To explore this further I analyse a debate on a forum following an article on how democratic Libya's opposition is, in which two contributors are responsible for 104 out of 284 comments. The contributors are Davgrin who posted 69 comments and received 44 replies and SawaAlZaman who posted 35 comments and received 29 replies, exchanging 35 comments between them. Davgrin's comments are the catalyst for other debates across the forum, including that with SidsKitchen exchanging 28 comments and BangorStu exchanging 14 comments. All four commenters contribute toward 'monopolisation of attention' (Appendix V).

The following example is from a lengthy debate between Davgrin and SawaAlZaman, consisting of medium intensity flames (Thompson & Foulger, 1996). Davgrin's comments, and replies to them, accounts for 113 comments out of 284, whilst SawaAlZaman totals 64 comments (Appendix V). SawaAlZaman refers to Davgrin in a condescending tone, particularly noticeable in his opening address 'Well, Davgrin' and again with 'Okay, do educate us Dav'. He goes on to discredit Davgrin's views, adding emotive undertones with his use of an exclamation mark (Fayard & DeSanctis, 2006). His tone is strongly condescending, and he patronisingly asks to be 'educated', attacking Davgrin's character by suggesting he is being disingenuous, concluding with a patronising 'many thanks' possibly intended as ironic 'over-politeness' (Kumon-Nakamura et al, 1995):

⁹³ E.g. In *RightMinds* John Smith is a regular contributor across numerous forums

SawaAlZaman @ Davgrin, Extract 1:

Well, Davgrin - You are being disingenuous if you think you can stretch a few former al-Qaeda operatives...into full-blown "Islamist rule" in Libya following the termination of Muammar's...repressive rule!

"I suppose what Western leaders need to decide is if they want a relatively secular despot running the country or if they want a more Islamic Libya...I fear that we are supporting Islamic extremists."

Okay, do educate us Dav - lets have some back up from reliable sources to substantiate both these claims. If you can't properly substantiate them, then one can only assume that you wish to discredit the new Libyan revolution and its Transitional National Council. Many thanks (Emphasis added, Comment 105⁹⁴).

Davgrin replies to SawaAlZaman in a condescending tone, defending the accusation he is being disingenuous. He includes limited counterclaims to SawaAlZaman's arguments, instead patronisingly alluding to him finding information out for himself:

Davgrin @ SawaAlZaman, Extract 2:

It seems reasonable enough (and not at all disingenuous) to think that having some Al Qaeda operatives involved with the rebels who my government are supporting is more worrying than not having Al Qaeda...involved. And that isn't the only report of rebel links to Islamic extremism. You can find them yourself, if you're really interested (Emphasis added, Comment 108, ibid).

In his response, SawaAlZaman's tone is strongly condescending attacking Davgrin for engaging in a 'cop-out'⁹⁵. He discredits Davgrin by suggesting he has not substantiated his arguments, condescendingly reiterating his 'spurious' claims and demanding a response. He concludes by patronisingly asking whether Davgrin knows how to insert 'links' in his posts, sarcastically implying that he does not:

SawaAlZaman @ Davgrin, Extract 3:

Yet another big cop out. It's all out there if one is interested, but I am waiting for you to back up your spurious claims that, to quote:

"I suppose what Western leaders need to decide is if they want a relatively secular despot running the country or if they want a more Islamic Libya"

And: "I fear that we are supporting Islamic extremists."

I repeat: do educate us Dav - lets have some back up from reliable sources to substantiate both these claims. If you can't properly substantiate them, then one can only assume that you wish to discredit the new Libyan revolution and its Transitional

⁹⁴ 'How Democratic is Libya's Opposition?', Ranj Alaaldin, 25.05.11

⁹⁵ A colloquial term for avoiding commitment or responsibility

National Council. You do know how to insert links into a post on this website, right? (Emphasis added, Comment 118⁹⁶).

Davgrin uses a condescending tone in his reply, patronisingly misrepresenting SawaAlZaman's claims. He discredits SawaAlZaman's views by sarcastically referring to 'the Americans' who spend 'I don't know how much money' on their 'fancy missile-armed drones' for 'neither rhyme nor reason', patronisingly implying that there can be 'no reason at all for their actions', and he will not 'suffer the consequences' when things go 'pear-shaped':

Davgrin @ SawaAlZaman, Extract 4:

SawaAlZaman "Davgrin It seems reasonable enough (and not at all disingenuous) to think that having some Al Qaeda operatives involved with the rebels who my government are supporting is more worrying than not having Al Qaeda...involved. And that isn't the only report of rebel links to Islamic extremism. You can find them yourself, if you're really interested'. Yet another big cop out".

Yes, of course it is. It's no problem at all that some of the rebels have links to Al Qaeda and anyone who suggests otherwise is being disingenuous The Americans spend I don't know how much money trying to kill Al Qaeda operative ... with their fancy missile-armed drones, then they provide military support to other Al Qaeda operatives in Libya. Neither rhyme nor reason...Don't blame me when it goes pear-shaped (Emphasis added, Comment 124, *ibid*).

SawaAlZaman's reply is condescending, particularly noticeable in his opening address 'Davgrin, Davgrin, Davgrin'. He criticises Davgrin for his lack of response to his questions, reiterating them once again to strengthen his point. Using the pronoun 'you' in this context is considered as forming part of an insult (Spertus, 1997) in this case combined with the accusation that Davgrin does not take substantiating his claims seriously, and so his arguments cannot be treated 'seriously', concluding with 'please', possibly intended as ironic 'over-politeness' (Kumon-Nakamura et al, 1995):

SawaAlZaman @ Davgrin, Extract 5:

Davgrin, Davgrin, Davgrin... I am still waiting for you to back up your spurious claims that, to quote:

"I suppose what Western leaders need to decide is if they want a relatively secular despot running the country or if they want a more Islamic Libya".
And: "I fear that we are supporting Islamic extremists."

⁹⁶ 'How Democratic is Libya's Opposition?', Ranj Alaaldin, 25.05.11

You are responsible for any claims you make - if you wish your comments to be taken seriously then we need some answers please (Emphasis added, Comment 129, *ibid*).

Davgrin then proceeds to post numerous comments with the ‘Links’ that SawaAlZaman demanded of him to substantiate his points, an example is given below:

Davgrin @ SawaAlZaman, Extract 6:

There have been a slew of recent reports that some of the Libyan rebels have al Qaeda ties. This seems not only credible, but obvious. Eastern Libya is a known jihadist hot spot. Where Arab governments are repressive and abusive, Islamism and jihad will fill the space occupied by legitimate political opposition in pluralistic systems. So, yes, some rebels undoubtedly have ties to al Qaeda. And, yes, it is frightening to think that in a slightly tortured mechanical reading of things, this puts us indirectly on the side of al Qaeda. Link. (Emphasis added, Comment 136, *ibid*).

Davgrin’s views are dominant within SawaAlZaman’s discourse, as are SawaAlZamans replies in his. The lesser medium intensity flame ‘tension’ is most prevalent with occasional ‘antagonistic, elements (Thompson & Foulger, 1996). The style and tone of the comments can also be described as ‘abusive’ in that both commenters use condescension, patronisation, and sarcasm in an apparent attempt to attack the others’ arguments, question their character and credibility and post insults. Despite this, both commenters remain in this exchange and on the forum, even after this debate has run its course. This is also true of other exchanges between contributors involved in ‘monopolised’ dialogues. Of the 7,238 comments posted, 4,826 comments were posted by 1,081 commenters posting multiple comments, and received 3,490 specific replies (Appendix U). This creates multiple debates within individual forums in which contributors continue to participate despite the practices of some contributors in attempting to ‘monopolise’ the debates.

As with other research in the area of online debates, present data suggests monopolisation is more likely to occur when there are limited numbers of commenters contributing numerous comments to individual forums (Davis, 1999; Jensen, 2003). Within the present data, the commenter involved in the greatest degree of monopolisation of a forum

stands at 48%, posting 21 comments out of a total of 44⁹⁷. However, ‘monopolisation’ largely occurs when groups of commenters dominate the forums, as in the example with Davgrin, SawaAlZaman, BangorStu and SidsKitchen. In his own research on a political party discussion forum, Kies (2010:141-2) argues that “as for most political forums... the debates are dominated by a minority of users...however...this apparent domination should not overshadow the participative and deliberative importance of the forum”. Whilst some commenters do ‘monopolise attention’ within the forums, and could be deemed to affect the inclusive and equal opportunity of various views being heard, such ‘monopolisation’ does not completely preclude them. Despite the level of ‘monopolisation’ within some of the forums, numerous commenters continue to participate in debates.

Unintended ‘Control of the Agenda’

Commenters most able to evoke contributions from others through introducing discussion topics and therefore encouraging participation hold a unique position in online debates and play a crucial role in shaping the agenda of online political discussions (Himmelboim et al, 2009). For contributors to ‘control the agenda’, their views must be presented and replied to consistently by a number of commenters, though this can lead to some individuals attracting a disproportionate number of replies to their comments, and that only a limited number of messages receive replies (Himmelboim et al, 2009). These findings are comparable to the present data. Furthermore, commenters who provoke replies within online debates often do so due to their lack of civility and rational argumentation in their posts (Constantinescu & Tedesco, 2007; Lee, 2005, Singer & Ashman, 2009).

With regard to flaming intensity, when comments were aimed at other contributors within the *RightMinds* forums they contained 195 medium intensity, 51 low intensity and 8 high intensity flames (Appendix L), the *Comment is Free* forums contain 1,932 medium

⁹⁷ ‘ETA may have been defeated militarily, but Basque Independence has not’, Luke Stobart, 28.10.11

intensity, 1,228 low intensity and 67 high intensity flames (Appendix M). This indicates that exchanges within the *Comment is Free* forums are less ‘abusive’ than those found in *RightMinds*, though both forums share a comparable percentage of high intensity flames at 2% and 3% respectively. Moreover, similarly to the *RightMinds* forums, small groups of commenters are able to ‘monopolise attention’ in individual *Comment is Free* forums.

According to Dahlberg (2001a) ‘control of the agenda’ is a subtle process in which commenters infuse their own particular style and agenda into online debates. Within the present data, of 2,502 comments coded under ‘control of the agenda’ (Appendix G), 2,076 are also coded as ‘abusive’, 2,003 as ‘monopolising’ and 1,595 comments are coded as containing expressive ‘antagonistic’ content. As such, contributors who ‘control the agenda’ also demonstrate ‘abusive’ and ‘monopolising’ tendencies. Consequently, debates are often hostile, allowing contributors none of the ‘subtlety’ that Dahlberg (2001a) suggests.

As per Himelboim et al’s (2009) definition, the 2,502 comments coded as ‘controlling the agenda’ comprise commenters consistently presenting their views and receiving replies from a number of contributors. Davgrin is one such commenter, identified as monopolising the attention of an individual forum, in which his comments are the catalyst for exchanges with a variety of contributors (Appendix V). In response to an article on how democratic Libya’s Opposition is, Davgrin’s position is that the Rebels in Libya do not have majority support, unlike Gaddafi’s regime, and also have links to Al Qaeda, and as a consequence Western Governments should not be supporting the rebels. His views dominate the forums, receiving numerous replies, a selection of these replies are as follows:

BangorStu @ Davgrin, Extract 1:

“The more I read about the rebels, the more I am convinced that we shouldn’t be backing them.”

Because Gaddafi is better than a side which has declared it will hold elections, is abiding by the Geneva Conventions and is full of human rights lawyers? Care to share your logic? (Emphasis added, Comment 167, *ibid*).

RobotNick @ Davgrin, Extract 2:

Davgrin - if the regime had anything like majority support then why for 4 four decades did it prohibit all opposition parties, media, demonstrations under the threat of imprisonment, torture and killing? (Emphasis added, Comment 92, ibid).

Finite187 @ Davgrin, Extract 3:

Davgrin "How representative of the Libyan people is Libya's opposition?", should be the first question. "Not very", appears to be the answer, or they wouldn't need western military intervention to remove the dictator's regime."

I see.. so Gaddafi's recruitment of foreign mercenaries, his starving of the regular army in favour of his well equipped personal guard, his shooting of protesters dead in the streets.. All this passed you by did it? Never let reality get in the way of you own prejudices, eh?(Emphasis added, Comment 39, ibid).

EACLucifer @ Davgrin, Extract 4:

Davgrin "I don't like paying for interference in other countries affairs."

So you value a few quid in your wallet more than the lives of Libyan children? There is a word for people like you. The mods would remove my post if I used it (Emphasis added, Comment 248, ibid).

As can be seen, responses to Davgrin's comments are 'abusive' and contain a high degree of emotional-volitional content, which goes against Dahlberg's (2001) demand for 'subtlety' in relation to 'control of the agenda'.

When considering if particular commenters can 'control the agenda', it is necessary to consider how such 'control' can be achieved. Dahlberg (2001a) argues that it does not come from posting numerous comments within a thread or abusing other contributors, it is more subtle. However, following Himmelboim et al's (2009) definition, it is commenters who attract messages that play an important role in shaping the agenda in online political discussion. Thus, whilst the subtlety Dahlberg (2001a) demands may not be present, commenters' views are consistently presented and challenged by a number of contributors who can be deemed to be 'controlling the agenda'.

Within the present data, commenters who 'monopolise' the forums are also those who 'control the agenda'. Whilst several commenters post numerous comments, no single commenter monopolises the entire forum. As with the example featuring Davgrin, there are often debates within the forums between several commenters, whose comments are focused

on the views of one or more particular commenters. Whilst Davgrin monopolises a particular forum, he alone cannot ‘control the agenda’. It is only when other commenters counteract his arguments that such ‘control’ occurs. For ‘control of the agenda’ to be maintained commenters must consistently interact across the full length of the forum, which occurs in 20 out of 40 forums (Appendix U). As such, ‘monopolisation of attention’ and ‘control of the agenda’ are two elements regularly found together within *Comment is Free* forums. It is beyond the remit of this thesis to try and ascertain whether the level of ‘control’ by commenters within the forums is intentional. However, I can suggest that it is more likely that the strong views of commenters, their defence of those views and the emotional-volitional elements of these debates that goad commenters into posting numerous comments, rather than an intentional desire to ‘control’ the style and agenda of the debate.

Chapter Discussion

Every participant affected by the validity claims under consideration is equally entitled to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever. Inclusion can be limited by inequalities from outside of discourse—by formal or informal restrictions to access. It can also be limited by inequalities within discourse, where some dominate discourse and others struggle to get their voices heard. (Dahlberg, 2001:623).

This chapter examined whether, and to what extent, ‘discursive inclusion and equality’ is present within *WHYS*, *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums. Dahlberg’s (2001) first claim is that external factors affect the potential for commenters to participate in online debates, particularly gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Within both the *RightMinds* and the *Comment is Free* forums, whilst the actual gender of contributors was not determined, figures obtained by analysing the self-attributed gendered pseudonyms commenters ascribe themselves, indicated that more male than female-gendered commenters contributed to the forums. The racial or ethnic identities of contributors and their socioeconomic status are rarely identified within any of the three forums. However, recent research indicates that ethnicity and socio-economic status continue to contribute toward

exclusions and inequalities in relation to gender (Da Silva, 2013b; Iosub et al, 2014) and negatively influences online participation (James, 2011; Hargittai, 2008). As such the lack of ‘inclusivity’, particularly the marginal numbers of female-gendered contributors to online debates, demonstrates external factors may affect equality of participation in the three forums.

With regard to Dahlberg’s (2001) second concern, that of ‘abusive’ posts within the forums, the structure of *WHYS* forums is such that it allows a series of responses to the original news article, rather than a forum for back-and-forth discussions between commenters. *WHYS* forums are ‘managed’ in such a way that commenters are unable to post ‘abusive’ comments, due to the process of pre-moderation. Unlike in *WHYS* where all forums are pre-moderated, 9 out of 25 *RightMinds* forums were ‘pre-moderated’ though this had very little effect on limiting the amount of ‘abusive’ posts, the other 16 are reactively moderated (Appendix Q). In contrast to *WHYS* and *RightMinds* forums, all comments are ‘reactively’ moderated within *Comment is Free*. This means that all comments are posted, and then removed if found to be inappropriate or if they receive complaints. Despite the less stringent moderation process within the *Comment is Free* forums, the number of ‘abusive’ posts are only 11% greater than in the *RightMinds* forums (Appendix G & F).

In both *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums it can be argued that high intensity flames may lead to commenters leaving the forum, though such comments are limited. Also, commenters, who participate in ‘abusive’ debates, largely do so in the form of medium intensity flaming (Thompson & Foulger, 1996). These medium intensity ‘flames’ have two levels ‘tension’ and ‘antagonism’. Within *RightMinds* forums, commenters largely participate in ‘antagonistic’ medium intensity flames comprising condescension, patronisation, and attacks along with personal insults, apparently intended to cast doubt on the credibility and character of the other. Within *Comment is Free*, commenters largely

participate in ‘tension’ medium intensity flames comprising patronisation, sarcasm and mockery apparently intended to cast doubt on the character and credibility of the other whilst promoting the strength of their own arguments. Despite the ‘abusiveness’ of the comments, *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* contributors continue to participate in these debates.

Dahlberg’s (2001) third concern relates to ‘monopolisation of attention’. To ‘monopolise’ the forums commenters must post numerous comments to an individual forum and receive a high number of replies (Ainsworth et al, 2005). Due to the ‘managed’ nature of *WHYS* forums, there is no evidence of multiple posts within the present data. In contrast, some commenters within the *RightMinds*, and the *Comment is Free* forums, participate in ‘monopolising’ the forums. These types of comments are presented as either ‘normative’ or ‘non-normative’ positions supported by specific ‘criticisable validity claims’ which suggest the potential for ‘rational-critical’ deliberation⁹⁸. However, the means by which contributors ‘monopolise’ the forums comprise ‘abusive’ characteristics including strong emotional-volitional content.

Within *RightMinds*, only a small group of contributors on a limited number of forums ‘monopolise’ the attention of other contributors. As such, Dahlberg’s (2001) concerns that certain participants ‘monopolise’ the forums, and thus negatively affect the inclusiveness and equality of other participants’ views, is not substantiated. Yet, within *Comment is Free* more than half of the forums experience a significant level of ‘monopolisation’. As such, commenters could be deemed to be negatively affecting the inclusiveness and equality of other participants’ views being represented in the forums.

Lastly, Dahlberg (2001a) argues inclusiveness and equality can be impeded by ‘control of the agenda’. According to Himelboim et al (2009), in order for commenters to ‘control the agenda’ they must consistently post comments and receive numerous replies.

⁹⁸ ‘Normative’ and ‘non-normative’ positions and ‘criticisable validity claims’ are analysed in Chapter 5.

Dahlberg (2001a) argues that this is a subtle process in which commenters infuse their own particular style and agenda into online debates. There is no evidence of ‘control of the agenda’ within *WHYS* forums as contributors are unable to interact. However, within *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free*, it is ‘abusive’ commenters who tend to ‘monopolise’ the forums that also ‘control the agenda’. Of the 25 *RightMinds* forums analysed, 9 contain debates in which commenters consistently presented their views and received replies from a number of contributors (Appendix R). In *Comment is Free* this number increases to 20 out of 40 forums (Appendix U). However, rather than commenters ‘controlling the agenda’ in a subtle indirect way, ‘control’ is achieved by a combination of ‘monopolisation’ and ‘abusive’ remarks, resulting in the style and tone of comments being significant in the extent of ‘control’ commenters’ can achieve.

Whilst ‘abusive’ posts are in evidence within *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free*, commenters are not deterred from participating in debates going some way to disproving Dahlberg’s (2001) concerns as to its negative effects on inclusiveness and equality. There is limited evidence of ‘monopolisation’ within *RightMinds* forums, though it is more significant within *Comment is Free*. However, other commenters continue to post comments despite the ‘monopolisation’, and no single commenter monopolises debates across all the forums. There is also evidence that that a small group of commenters within *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* are able to ‘control the agenda’ of the forums, though this largely achieved through abusive’ posts and ‘monopolisation’. However, ‘control of the agenda’ is achieved by numerous commenters participating in debates with one another and is likely to be the result of the process of active deliberation rather than an overt attempt by certain individuals to ‘control the agenda’ of the forums.

Having considered whether, and what extent ‘discursive inclusion and equality’ is present within the three forums; I now turn to the analysis of ‘exchange and critique’. This

set of criteria is based on Dahlberg's (2001) supposition that when commenters participate in rational-critical debates they must do so using 'normative' arguments supported by specific 'criticisable validity claims' not dogmatically asserted. Having analysed to what extent commenters are able to engage in 'autonomous' debates free from State and commercial influence in Chapter 3, and how they participate inclusively and equally within the forums in Chapter 4, I now analyse the ways in commenters construct online debates and whether, and to what extent, commenters participate in 'exchange and critique' .

Chapter 5

The Process of ‘Exchange’ and ‘Critique’

Reciprocal critique sets the basic structure of argumentation. It demands the putting forward and subsequent critique of political claims that are criticisable, that is, that are backed with reasons rather than consisting of mere assertions (Dahlberg, 2000:182).

Dahlberg (2001a) is concerned with the deliberative quality of online debates arguing that commenters presenting ‘dogmatic assertions’, unsupported by specific criticisable validity claims, cannot be considered as participating in ‘exchange and critique’. In order for commenters to be regarded as fulfilling Dahlberg’s (2001) criteria, they must reciprocally present ‘normative’ arguments that is rational arguments focused on reaching understanding, supported by specific internally and/or externally validated ‘criticisable validity claims’ (Jensen, 2003). This chapter evaluates the level of ‘exchange and critique’ within the *WHYS*, *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums. To assess the ways in which commenters may participate in ‘exchange and critique’, the form and content of each of the three forums are analysed. I then summarise whether, or to what extent, commenters’ participation in ‘exchange and critique’ can be achieved.

***WHYS* ‘Exchange and Critique’**

Within the present data, the structure of the forums is such that it allows a series of responses to the original news article, rather than a forum for back-and-forth discussions between commenters on the general topic raised. Coleman (2008) describes these types of restricted debates as ‘managed’. This ‘management’ is a result of technological affordances that exert tight controls over debates (Coleman, 2008).

As such, *WHYS* forums can be deemed to be ‘managed’ with the aim of restricting commenters focus to responding to article content. Dahlberg’s (2001) ‘exchange and critique’ criteria rely on reciprocal exchanges of views to determine the deliberative quality

of online debates and how closely the quality of those debates meet the rational-critical ideal of deliberative theory (Albrecht, 2006:75). Tsaliki (2002) suggests that, the dynamics of an online discussion heavily influenced by article content results in an analysis of article-influenced comments rather than focusing on exchanges between contributors.

Dahlberg (2001a) argues it is necessary for commenters to engage in ‘exchange and critique’ in order for them to participate in reciprocal ‘rational-critical’ debates. Within the *WHYS* forums, ‘exchange and critique’ is fundamentally absent from a forum whose motto is ‘world have your say’. However, commenters post dogmatic assertions and comments supported by criticisable validity claims within the *WHYS* forums, the inclusion of which will enable a comparative analysis of the structure, style and tone of comments against the *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums. Whilst the comments within *WHYS* fail Dahlberg’s (2000) online public sphere criteria at a fundamental level (the lack of debates between contributors) it is nonetheless useful to analyse the comments therein.

The Prevalence of ‘Dogmatic Assertions’ in *WHYS*

According to Dahlberg (2001a:187) dogmatic assertions are the result of pre-set ideologies, where participants are unprepared to revise their values, claims and assumptions, resulting in repetitive exchanges of views, and that such views severely limit the potential for ‘exchange and critique’. Dahlberg (2004:33) goes on to argue that commenters rarely acknowledge criticisms made against them, with even fewer willing to change their position in the course of a debate, resulting in ‘dogmatic ranting’ rather than rational deliberation (Dahlberg, 2004:33). However, following Bakhtin’s (1986) assertion that all utterances are a link in a chain of speech communication, how are dogmatic assertions expressed within online dialogic texts? To assess the extent of ‘dogmatic assertions’ within the present data, it is necessary to not only identify them in Dahlbergian terms, but to analyse how contributors go about articulating their views in Bakhtinian terms. Despite the lack of interaction between

commenters on *WHYS* forums, commenters respond to the utterances of others (the author), some are intrinsically dialogic, and all are guided by particular speech genres within the text.

Whilst the *BBC* presents *WHYS* as a space in which contributors can ‘have their say’ on news events, the forums do not support contributor-to-contributor interactions.

Consequently, of the 136 ‘dogmatically asserted’ comments coded (Appendix E), 107 are addressed to the ‘wider community’, and 121 contain reference to article content, with no comments containing any reference to other commenters or their comments (Appendix W).

Thus, speech genres are non-interactive and comprise two elements, (1) the structure of the comments based on the content of the utterance, and (2) the style and tone of those

comments. Commenters largely contribute through four channels *Twitter*, *SMS*, *Facebook*, *WHYS* forums, two of which substantially restrict the number of characters per post⁹⁹.

Comments posted via *Twitter* are restricted to 140 characters, via *SMS* to 160 characters, via *Facebook* to 500 characters¹⁰⁰ and directly to *WHYS* forums to 2000 characters. Table 1 gives an example of each of the four generic forms of dogmatically asserted comments.

Table 1: Four channels of comment submission on *WHYS* forums

Commenter	Mode	Comment	Character Limit
Anonymous	<i>Twitter</i>	The entire point of SlutWalk is that pop culture exists and is misogynistic.	140
A. Kabir, Phil.	<i>SMS</i>	NATO action in Libya is unjust. May Allah curse them in this World and the year hereafter! Sender, A. Kabir, Phil.	160
Abdul	<i>Facebook</i>	the Syrian government should now stop gagging the media	500
Native English not British	<i>WHYS</i>	Of course ritual slaughter of animals should be banned in a civilised country.	2000

⁹⁹ Comments identified on the *WHYS* forum as ‘posted via unknown’ are not included in the analysis

¹⁰⁰ During the sample period, *Facebook* increased the character count for posts from 420 to 500 characters. See Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/schrep/posts/203969696349811> accessed 13.08.14

As can be seen, the structure of dogmatically asserted comments comprises short statements or points presented without reasons for assertions, which according to Gerodimos (2004) can lead to polarisation in online debates, in which contributors represent dogmatic opposites, leading to conflict rather than dialogue. Of the 199 comments posted to the forums, 136 are dogmatically asserted, and 63 are normatively presented, supported by criticisable validity claims¹⁰¹ (Appendix E). The greatest proportion of *WHYS* commenters posted their views via *Twitter* amounting to 78 out of 199 comments, followed by SMS at 54 comments, directly on the *WHYS* forum at 53 comments and via *Facebook* at 14 comments.

Due to the restrictions on character count, comments made via *Twitter* and SMS are likely to be constructed in the form of dogmatic assertions. Whilst users of *Twitter* regularly provide hyperlinks to support assertions (Johnson, 2009; Murthy, 2012), no such links are in evidence within the *WHYS* forums, as in this typical example from a commenter responding to an article on Eurozone austerity measures¹⁰²:

I feel the whole lot of the Euro zone is becoming ungovernable. It was misconceived from the start (Anonymous, Comment 3¹⁰³).

As *Twitter* was developed to be compatible with mobile devices' character limit (Sagolla, 2009) commenters are required to make their points as concisely as possible when posting via *Twitter* and SMS. Both *Twitter* and SMS messaging provide a means by which commenters can post comments quickly, making their point with the minimum amount of time and effort (Palen et al, 2007). However, Holtgraves (2010) argues that the consequences of such speed and brevity include abbreviations, acronyms and misspelling, as this post via *Twitter* demonstrates "Victim at all stages, accused unless found guilty. Allegations can ruin lifes, not 2 b taken lightly" (Anonymous, Comment 10, *WHYS6*).

¹⁰¹ The analysis of 'normatively' presented comments supported by 'criticisable validity claims' comes later in this Chapter.

¹⁰² Whilst the subject of the comments do not form part of the analysis, it is necessary for the general content to be known so that evidence of exchange and critique can be identified.

¹⁰³ 'Is Greece Ungovernable?', Chloe Tilley, 16.06.11

Dahlberg (2001a) argues that commenters are compelled to participate in debates with limited space to express one's views, indicating that commenters may not necessarily be consciously choosing to make dogmatic assertions; instead, their contributions could be shaped by the medium through which they choose to communicate their views (Crystal, 2001). As such, whilst *Twitter* and *SMS* messaging offer contributors the opportunity to comment with a minimum amount of time and effort, the length restrictions placed upon commenters may play an important role in producing dogmatic assertions.

Having established that commenters post dogmatically asserted comments to the *WHYS* forums, I now move on to the second part of the analysis, style and intonation of utterances. Present data indicates that comments coded as 'dogmatic' have argumentative characteristics, with 44 comments coded under the 'hidden dialogic', and 48 under the 'hidden polemic' styles of utterance, with 62 comments coded as 'antagonistic' (Appendix W). The 'hidden dialogic' style of utterance requires no reference to or quotation of, the content to which they are responding. It is characterised by only one half of a conversation being presented yet the overall sense of the conversation is preserved (Bakhtin, 1984:197).

Within the present data, article content comprises the hidden half of 'hidden dialogicality'. However, such comments do not resemble the 'conversational' element of Bakhtin's (1986) criteria for this particular 'style' of utterance. Moreover, these comments regularly contain a high degree of emotional-volitional content more akin to the 'hidden polemic' or 'parodic' styles of utterance (Bakhtin, 1984). Consequently, within *WHYS* forums, comments identified as 'dogmatic assertions' can be described as more of a hybrid style of utterance comprising the 'hidden' element of 'hidden dialogicality' and the 'polemic' element of 'hidden polemic'.

It is Bakhtin's (1984b) contention that all speech contains 'expressive' meaning, that it is value laden and ascribed with 'moral, cognitive, aesthetic and affective qualities that are

designed to provoke active responses' (Gardiner, 2004:36). Yet, Dahlberg (2001a) argues that emotional-volitional language is anathema to rational-critical debate with its focus on reaching understanding through deliberation. What is central to both arguments is the necessity for commenters to interactively participate in reciprocal debates.

Commenters within the *WHYS* forums do not participate in interactive debates. Nevertheless, comments are imbued with 'expressive' undertones which manifest in either low or high emotional-volitional content. Those who produce low emotional-volitional content demonstrate willingness to present rational-critical views, which occurs in 38 out of 136 dogmatically asserted comments. However, 62 out of 136 comments contain high emotional-volitional content, anathema to Dahlberg's (2000) demand for 'rational-critical' debate (Appendix W). To explore this further, I consider two comments on a forum following an article in which the question of whether women's clothing affects their likelihood of being raped is the central theme. Commenters can be understood as representing one of two dogmatic positions: those who argue that certain dress increases the likelihood of rape, and those who argue it does not.

The first comment contains low emotional-volitional content, in that it is presented in a 'matter-of-fact' tone, though its content is highly provocative. The commenter suggests that 'promiscuous' clothing could result in rape, implying such clothing leads men into having difficulty controlling their 'sex drive' (clothing increases likelihood of rape):

Anonymous:

we've forgotten that men are "visual" creatures. when a man sees women dressing promiscuously it instantly turns on his sex (Comment 9¹⁰⁴).

The second commenter is condescending, with shouting denoted through capital letters. They emphasise what they consider to be a factual inaccuracy, that clothing and rape are somehow connected (clothing does not increase likelihood of rape).

¹⁰⁴ 'Slutwalks' Was the Toronto Police Offer Right?', *WHYS Team*, 10.05.11

Anonymous:

Clothing choices have NO impact on the risk of rape. That is factually incorrect (Comment 20¹⁰⁵).

Yet, as in all dogmatically asserted comments, neither commenter offers any specific evidence to support their views. As such within the present data, comments contain polarised views that are largely dogmatically asserted, which do not meet Dahlberg's (2000:75) requirements for engaging in 'exchange and critique'.

The Unrealised Potential of 'Criticisable Validity Claims'

According to Dahlberg (2000) online debates require a 'normative' backdrop, which is reasoned positions through which understanding, and consensus can be achieved, against which assertions can be criticised, and from which reciprocal exchanges of views can take place. Within the present data, of the 199 comments coded under 'exchange and critique', 63 comments are coded as containing 'criticisable validity claims' (Appendix E). To assess whether, or to what extent, comments contain 'normative' positions supported by 'criticisable validity claims' such content must be identified not only in Dahlbergian terms, but to analyse how contributors articulate their views in Bakhtinian terms.

The speech genre associated with 'normative' positions supported by 'criticisable validity claims' within the *WHYS* forums, comprises contributors responding to article content and has two elements, (1) the structure of comments within the forums based on the content of the utterance, and (2) the style and tone of those comments. As can be seen in Figure 10, commenters address one another in one of two ways: first, referring to or quoting part of the article to which they are responding (LilyWhite, Comment 6¹⁰⁶) or second, stating their views without reference or quotation (MicheNorman, Comment 3¹⁰⁷).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ 'Should Animal Rights Trump Religious Rights?' Nuala McGovern, 29.06.11

¹⁰⁷ 'The Latest on the Arab Spring', Chloe Tilley, 06.05.11

Fig. 10: Two standardised comments containing ‘criticisable validity claims’ within WHYS forums

	Articles	Comments	Common Conventions
1.	‘Should Animal Rights Trump Religious Rights?’ Nuala McGovern, 29.06.11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Re: What's your take on the vote? Would you like to see it implemented in your country? 2. My mom uses the saying "that's not kosher" when something isn't right. If something is kosher it is right and as it should be. 3. There are already measures being taken to reduce suffering to the animals being slaughtered 4. so this banning is an infringement upon religious freedom/rights. Animals rights do not trump religious rights! 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Quoting article content 2. Internal validation via use of colloquial saying 3. External validation 4. Provocative emotional-volitional statement emphasised with exclamation mark
2.	‘The Latest on the Arab Spring’, Chloe Tilley, 06.05.11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How is it that Cameron cannot stand by and watch the pro-Western Kadafi use force against his people – but he seems to be quite relaxed about effectively doing nothing when 2. the vicious Syrian regime, turns the full force of its army against its own people, 2. remembering that we are talking about the son of a dictator who did not hesitate to murder 50,000 people in a weekend, and who quite patently is a chip off the same block 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Condescending Overtones 2. Internally validated claims 3. Externally validated claim

Common conventions within the comments include using repertoires associated with the topic at hand; using personal experiences, beliefs and values to support views expressed; and including verifiable information within posts. Commenters also include emotional-volitional responses such as condescension, anger or frustration often accompanied by moralising overtones, and to a lesser extent empathy, understanding and support. Emotional responses are often accompanied by the use of exclamation and/or question marks and to a lesser extent, capitalisation of words representing shouting in the online context.

Unlike dogmatically asserted posts, some commenters present their arguments supported by specific ‘criticisable validity claims’. Following Jensen (2003:360) these ‘validity claims’ can be broken down into two discrete values¹⁰⁸: external validation which comprises the use of external sources and facts/figures, and internal validation which is based on explicit individual viewpoints, attitudes and values. Whilst the relationship between the article/author and commenter is not in any way ‘oppositional’ (Sturges, 1995: 132) there is evidence of emotional-volitional undertones within some comments.

The following two extracts are typical examples of arguments supported by specific externally, and internally-validated criticisable validity claims respectively. The first comment was posted following an article on whether animal rights supersede religious rights, the second following an article concerning the trustworthiness of Western media coverage on the Middle East. Tony Wardle’s comment can be deemed to be ‘normative’ in that he offers a reasoned argument, using a number of specific externally validated ‘facts’, along with views based on repertoires concerning human and animal rights. He identifies ‘hard-fought battles’ for human rights and ‘steadfastly’ refusing to surrender those rights to religious practices (Crawley, 2011) and that animals deserve the same protection (BBC, 2012).

Tony Wardle, Extract 1:

Advances in human and animal rights have progressed through hard-fought battles over decades. We refuse steadfastly to surrender our human rights to accommodate individual religious beliefs so why on Earth should we not defend animals... (Emphasis added, Comment 16¹⁰⁹).

He criticises what he argues are ‘inaccurate and quasi scientific claims’ which seek to ‘justify’ cruelty. He refers to instances of being present during animal slaughter, witnessing the pain and slow death of the animals and corroborates those experiences by referring to

¹⁰⁸ Jensen’s (2003) Validity claims also contains a third value, that of ‘allegations’ which refers to claims made without any kind of validation or facts. Within the context of the present study, Jensen’s (2003) ‘allegations’ share similarities with Dahlberg’s (2006) ‘dogmatic assertions’ and has therefore been omitted from the analysis of normatively presented comments supported by criticisable validity claims.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Should Animal Rights Trump Religious Rights?’ Nuala McGovern, 29.06.11

‘two scientific reports from the government advisory body, the Farm Animal Welfare Council’, in which the suffering of the animals is considered to be ‘profound’:

The situation is compounded when inaccurate and quasi scientific claims are made to justify such cruelty - i.e...cutting the throat of a conscious animal is painless, death is instantaneous and the process is essential...We have filmed religious slaughter and it is not painless and far from instant, observations backed up by two scientific reports from the government advisory body, the Farm Animal Welfare Council, who describe the trauma experienced by animals as 'profound' (Emphasis added, ibid).

He confidently asserts that scientific facts outweigh religious belief when it comes to gauging the suffering of animals, suggesting that if both the Jewish and Muslim religions want to observe their own religious teachings properly, they would abide by ‘our’ welfare laws and stop eating animals.

Five hundred years ago people may have believed that bleeding a conscious animal drained all blood from its body but science now tells us differently...Both Jewish and Muslim religions forbid the consuming of blood so if either community truly wishes to observe its religious teachings it is they who need to change not our welfare laws [and] stop eating animals (Emphasis added, ibid).

Thomas Murray’s comment follows a forum on an article concerning the trustworthiness of Western reporting of news events in the Middle East. His comment is not presented from a ‘normative’ position based on reasoned arguments aimed at reaching understanding, though discursive democracy does not only consist of rational argument, storytelling and personal experience are also used (Dunne, 2009). Therefore, his views can be considered as appropriately ‘discursive’ through him using specific internally validated criticisable claims (Jensen, 2003) whilst basing his argument on personal experience as a ‘professional student’¹¹⁰ arguing that the ‘secret’ of success is multiple sources. A technique also used by journalists reporting for the *BBC* (Bennett, 2013). His ‘multi-source’ approach informs his views on gathering information about the news, and he suggests that the greater the number of sources one uses, the better informed one becomes. This claim is supported by

¹¹⁰ Holding multiple degrees and continuously taking courses rather than using qualifications to undertake a career

Yuan's (2011:1000) study in which repertoires of news consumption, and patterns of media use were found to constitute "much more nuanced relationships among media uses".

Thomas Murray, Extract 2:

A professional student's secret: Never rely on just one textbook covering any particular subject....I found one text in the university library dated from the 1840s that was particularly informative. The same goes for the news. The greater the variety of your sources, the more accurate will be the picture that you obtain (Emphasis added, Comment 3¹¹¹).

His beliefs and values are made clear when he articulates his views on well-known repertoires concerning media restrictions in the Middle East (Biagi, 2014). He argues that those most in need of multiple news sources are the ones with the least amount of access to a variety of media sources:

The sad irony of this is that the most most affected by controversy -- the citizens in Libya, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen -- are the most restricted in the range of media they can access. Pity (Emphasis added, ibid).

Where some contributors present 'normative' positions in the course of their comments, others focus on expressing 'non-normative' viewpoints, yet both use specific 'criticisable validity claims'. Where 'normative' positions are conceived as focusing on reaching understanding and consensus (Habermas, 1989) 'non-normative' positions are viewed as being based on description rather than argument (Kunelius & Reunanen, (2012), and on 'values' instead of 'facts' (Schroeder, 2007) and that there are instances in which 'normative' facts depend on 'non-normative' claims (Scanlon, 2014). Dahlberg (2001a) values the 'normative' means of debate, though argumentation based on personal values made explicit is still regarded as "good for deliberation" (Janssen & Kies, 2005:14). However, the significance of these findings regarding the potential for commenters to 'reach understanding' through reasoned debate cannot be measured.

¹¹¹ 'Who do you trust to tell you about the Arab Spring?', Chloe Tilley, 09.05.11

Having ascertained that commenters participate in debates supported by specific criticisable validity claims, I now move on to the second part of the analysis, style and intonation of utterances. Within the present data comments coded as containing ‘criticisable validity claims’ comprise argumentative characteristics (Appendix W). The ‘hidden dialogic’ style of utterance does not require commenters to refer to, or quote the content to which they are responding and is characterised by only one half of a conversation being presented (Bakhtin, 1984:197).

Whilst article content comprises the ‘hidden’ half of ‘hidden dialogicality’, many comments do not resemble the ‘conversational’ element associated with this particular ‘style’ of utterance. This is particularly notable in Thomas Murray’s comment in which he is undoubtedly responding to something/one yet it is not clearly evident to what/whom. Whilst this style of utterance is not employed in strongly adversarial posts, it nonetheless encompasses the ‘expressive’ qualities of utterances suggested by Bakhtin (1986) and therefore more akin to the ‘hidden polemic’ or ‘parodic’ styles of utterance. Comments are value laden and ascribed with ‘moral, cognitive, aesthetic and affective qualities that are designed to provoke active responses’ (Gardiner, 2004:36). Yet, Dahlberg (2001a) argues that emotional-volitional language is anathema to rational-critical debate with its focus on reaching understanding through deliberation.

In the comments outlined above, both Tony Wardle and Thomas Murray’s comments are critical in nature. However, Thomas Murray’s views are not ‘normatively’ presented. Moreover, the intonation of the comments does not satisfy Dahlberg’s (2000:75) demand for ‘rational-critical’ debate in which contributors present arguments and counterarguments, in which the ‘force of the better argument’ takes precedence. Tony Wardle and Thomas Murray focus on presenting their views, some based on ‘facts’ or ‘externally’ validated claims, or based on explicit individual viewpoints, attitudes and values or ‘internally’ validated claims

(Jensen, 2003). It is not necessary for commenters to provide reasons for assertions within the *WHYS* forums, as contributors are unable to respond to the comments of others, yet a minority of commenters do so. However, their comments cannot be considered ‘rational-critical’ due to the emotional-volitional content in their posts. In Bakhtinian (1986:85) terms, the ‘expressivity’ of these utterances is adversarial and can be deemed to be attempting to provoke a response, which lends itself to creating debates.

In Tony Wardle’s comment he has a high level of emotional-volitional content in his post. His tone is moralising against religions involved in animal ‘cruelty’, expressing exasperation as to ‘why on Earth’ animals should ‘suffer’ when humans do not. He condemns ‘quasi-scientific claims’ that suggest animals do not suffer in religious slaughter as misleading, basing his views on his own personal experience. He belittles members of religious communities arguing that religious practices from ‘500 years ago’ have no place in society today, discrediting the claims made by religious groups in the face of scientific findings. He condescendingly suggests that if both the Jewish and Muslim communities want to ‘observe’ their own ‘religious teachings’ properly, they should abide by ‘our’ welfare laws and stop eating animals.

In Thomas Murray’s comment he has a lower level of emotional-volitional content. He suggests, based on his role as a ‘professional student’, that one must use a multitude of sources to generate an ‘informed’ opinion. He proposes that using more than one news source will result in a more accurate view of events. He shows empathy towards citizens in the Middle East, and pities those most affected by ‘controversy’ as he asserts they are least likely to have access to a variety of news sources.

Within the present data, commenters do not participate in interactive debates. Nevertheless, comments are imbued with ‘expressive’ undertones which manifest in either low or high emotional-volitional content. Those who engage in low emotional-volitional

content demonstrate the potential for some contributors to present rational-critical views. However, those who engage in high emotional-volitional content present their views anathema to Dahlberg's (2000) demand for 'rational-critical' debate.

In relation to the comments outlined above, and of others they represent, it is clear that some commenters present 'normative' positions supported by externally and/or internally validated 'criticisable validity claims'. In so doing, these commenters could be regarded as engaging in Dahlberg's 'exchange and critique' criteria. Yet commenters also present their arguments based on 'non-normative' personal experience, beliefs and values which are still intrinsically criticisable. As such, the necessity of 'normative' arguments has not been substantiated, and the presence of emotional-volitional content is anathema to Dahlberg's (2000) demand for 'rational critical' debate. Furthermore, the literal meaning of 'exchange and critique' are notably absent in a forum in which commenters cannot 'exchange' views and thus engage in 'critique' of the arguments of others.

Limited 'Dogmatic Assertions' in *RightMinds*

According to Dahlberg (2001a:187) dogmatic assertions are the result of pre-set ideologies, where participants are unprepared to revise their values, claims and assumptions, and that such views severely limit the potential for 'exchange and critique'. Within the present data, of the 1,944 comments coded under 'exchange and critique', 759 comments are coded as 'dogmatic' (Appendix F). Analysis also shows that only 47 of those comments are addressed to other commenters (Appendix L). It is Dahlberg's (2001) contention that by reducing the number of dogmatically asserted posts online contributors will be more likely to participate in the type of rational-critical debate demanded by the public sphere.

However, Dahlberg (2004:33) goes on to argue that commenters largely fail to acknowledge criticisms made against them, resulting in what he describes as 'dogmatic ranting'. Following Bakhtin's (1986) assertion that all utterances are a link in a chain of

speech communication, how are dogmatic assertions expressed within online dialogic texts? To answer this question, both a Dahlbergian and Bakhtinian analysis of the comments is undertaken to assess the extent of ‘dogmatic assertions’ within the *RightMinds* forums. The intrinsically dialogic nature of interactions between commenters leads to many different tones and viewpoints being expressed, and which are guided by particular speech genres.

The speech genre associated with dogmatic assertions between contributors is largely manifested through ‘antagonistic’ criticism of the other, in the form of hostile tones expressed as condescension, sarcasm, and feigned emotional evaluative responses. Contributors also include the excessive use of punctuation to emphasise their point, referring to the other in the third person and/or using ‘you’ as part of an insult. These hostile exchanges comprise two elements: (1) the structure of comments based on the content of the utterance, and (2) the style and intonation of comments. Contributors present their comments in three standardised ways, which creates a generic form for commenter responses. The ‘block quote’ function is used to quote an entire comment (Baz, Comment 171¹¹²), secondly, commenters partially refer to, or quote the other’s comment (Gary, Comment 75¹¹³), and thirdly, commenters do not refer to, or quote, the other’s comment (Mark, Comment 58¹¹⁴) (Figure 11).

¹¹² ‘Fight for the Right to lie in bed all day’, Richard Littlejohn, 21.02.12

¹¹³ ‘Don’t be fooled by Resurgent Labour. They would soon send us the way of Greece’, Simon Heffer, 26.05.12

¹¹⁴ ‘It’s not only rape victims betrayed by the system’, Richard Littlejohn, 20.05.11

Fig. 11: Three standardised ‘dogmatic’ comments within *RightMinds* forums

	Article	Comments	Common Conventions
1.	‘Fight for the Right to lie in bed all day’, Richard Littlejohn, 21.02.12	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If I was an employer and 2 people came for a job, one had done nothing for 18 months and the other had been...stacking shelves on a voluntary basis I would definately choose the volunteer. - Working class hero 2. Ha Ha Ha Ha! If I was an employer I'd...get someone off the dole ...to work for nothing and...later replace them with another poor sap. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Internally validated claim 2. Sarcastic mockery
2.	‘Don’t Be Fooled by Resurgent Labour. They would soon send us the way of Greece’, Simon Heffer, 26.05.12	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rachel Reeves has certainly been fast tracked by Labour..... Her husband is director of the international HM Treasury..... 2. Labour always likes to keep jobs in the family - G Farley 3. Errrrrrr..... 4. Cameron, Johnson, Osborne, Bullingdon club. 5. I really don't think you are on good ground talking about nepotism and being a Tory. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Externally validated claims 2. Sarcasm 3. ‘Errrrr’ used to make fun of someone 4. Internally validated claims 5. Condescension
3.	‘Its not only rape victims betrayed by the system’, Richard Littlejohn, 20.05.11	<p>At: Voice of reason</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Oh my God! 2. You have opened my eyes. 3. I never before realised that there's no difference between the way a hererosexual man views sex with a man and the way a heterosexual woman views it.... 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Feigned surprise 2. ‘You’ as a form of insult 3. Sarcastic mockery

As can be seen, the structure of dogmatically asserted comments comprises short statements or points presented without reasons for assertions. Dogmatic assertions contain a high degree of emotional-volitional content which is anathema to Dahlberg's (2000) demand for 'rational-critical' debate. Yet, Dahlberg (2001a) argues that commenters are compelled to participate in debates with limited space to express one's views, indicating that commenters may not necessarily be consciously choosing to make dogmatic assertions. However, there is no discernible character count for *RightMinds* forums, and as such, restrictions as to comment length can be regarded as playing no part in determining the 'dogmatic' nature of posts.

Having ascertained that commenters post 'dogmatic assertions' within the forums, I now move on to the second part of the analysis, style and intonation of utterances. Within the present data comments coded as 'dogmatic' comprise argumentative characteristics. When making dogmatic assertions, 438 commenters out of 759 engage the highly critical 'hidden polemic' style of utterance (Appendix L). This style of utterance is adversarial and demands reference to, or quotation of, the content to which the present interlocutor is responding (Bakhtin, 1986). Where Dahlberg (2001a) argues that emotional-volitional language is anathema to rational critical debate, Bakhtin (1986) argues that it is just such language that inflects utterances with "moral, cognitive, aesthetic and affective qualities that are designed to provoke active responses" (Gardiner, 2004: 36).

Emotional-volitional content is identifiable in exchanges of dogmatic assertions, though such exchanges are limited (Appendix L). In the following extract from a forum following an article on the apparent resurgence in the Labour Party's popularity¹¹⁵, two commenters become embroiled in an exchange of personal insults rather than focusing on the topic in hand. Gary responds to Alimac's comment to TheBigBopper in which she

¹¹⁵ Whilst the subject of the comments do not form part of the analysis, it is necessary for the general content to be known so that evidence of exchange and critique can be identified.

condescendingly discredits his views, patronisingly congratulating the Labour Party for encouraging its members to comment on the forum, using capital letters to denote shouting, to emphasise Labour ‘lost’ the last election. She sarcastically argues she would ‘rather pull her finger nails out’ than ‘lower’ herself to read the ‘gutter press’:

Alimac @ TheBigBopper, Extract 1:

“The Tory "Greece" scare story used to work but its wearing a bit thin now. Besides the right wing zealots would love a Greece scenario so they can achieve their dream of watching ordinary working people struggle and starve”. The Big Bopper

It will be real enough if your beloved socialists ever get a sniff of power again. We need Heffer to occasionally redress the balance in a newspaper that is rapidly becoming just a satellite publication of the Socialist Workers Gazette. I congratulate the Labour party for encouraging so many of its members to contribute to the newspaper, a trend very noticeable since the LOST the last election. *I would be tempted to do the same in reverse but I would rather pull my finger nails out than read the nonsense in the socialist gutter press* (Emphasis added, Comment 72¹¹⁶).

In his response, Gary condescendingly tells Alimac she can ‘keep her nails’ suggesting she goes ‘back to the Sun forums’, taking a snide ‘dig’ at the quality of her views:

Gary @ Alimac, Extract 2:

I would rather pull my finger nails out than read the nonsense in the socialist gutter press [The Guardian]-alimac,.....

You can keep you nails and just go back to the Sun forums, giving you three reasons to look in it (Emphasis added, Comment 76, *ibid*).

Alimac’s reply is also condescending in which she insinuates he is also ‘already familiar’ with the Sun forums himself, insinuating his views are no better than hers and it is he who should go and ‘proliferate’ his ‘socialist nonsense’:

Alimac @ Gary, Extract 3:

I would rather pull my finger nails out than read the nonsense in the socialist gutter press-alimac....You can keep you nails and just go back to the Sun forums, giving you three reasons to look in it. – Gary *****

Clearly you are familiar with it as well then. Another paper that Victoria Street HQ encourage you to comment on and proliferate your socialist nonsense (Emphasis added, Comment 80, *ibid*).

¹¹⁶ ‘Don’t be fooled by Resurgent Labour. They would soon send us the way of Greece’, Simon Heffer, 26.05.12

Both comments are condescending and contain personal insults, which dominate dogmatic assertions. As with all dogmatically asserted comments, neither commenter offers any evidence to support their views, instead making snide, derisory remarks apparently intended to question their credibility and character within the forum. These types of comments, in which contributors resort to dogmatic attacks, can lead to clashes between contributors rather than promoting dialogue (Gerodimos, 2004). As such, Dahlberg's (2006) concerns that dogmatic assertions negatively affect online debate are substantiated within the *RightMinds* forums, though only to a limited extent.

Criticism and 'Criticisable Validity Claims'

Unlike *WHYS* forums, commenters on *RightMinds* forums demonstrate the potential for 'exchange and critique' by responding to other contributors' posts. In order to analyse 'exchange and critique', the requirements should first be clarified. Dahlberg (2001a) argues that online deliberation reproduces the basic structure of rational-critical debates and approximates certain requirements of the public sphere. Dahlberg (2001a) argues that debates require a normative backdrop against which assertions can be criticised, and from which reciprocal exchanges of views can take place. Therefore, commenters should be focused on the 'normative' conception of 'reaching understanding' and providing specific criticisable validity claims to support their views. Present data reveals that of the 1,944 comments coded under 'exchange and critique', 1,185 comments are supported by specific 'criticisable validity claims', 720 of which are 'internally' validated and 457 'externally' validated (Appendix F), with 234 comments being addressed to commenters (Appendix L).

Aikens (1997:136) claims that in the context of online discussions there is a strong incentive for commenters to adhere to the normative values of the community, and Bohman (1998:410) suggests that "the outcomes of deliberations must...be supported by reasons". As such, deliberations must be supported by specific 'criticisable validity claims' yet the

‘normative’ positioning of the contributor is less significant in as much as “the requirements of justification, and the structure of argumentation are all adapted to a context in which doubts, opposition, objections, and counterclaims arise” (van Eemeren, 2010:1). The intrinsically dialogic interactions within the *RightMinds* forums comprise many different tones and viewpoints, and are guided by particular speech genres. These interactions must be analysed in accordance with Bakhtin’s (1986) assertion that all utterances are value-laden, and against Dahlbergian criteria for ‘rational-critical’ debate, to ascertain whether ‘exchange and critique’ is present within the forums.

The examination of these intrinsically dialogic interactions focuses on the patterns generated by commenters engaging in a speech genre comprising dialogic responses to comment content. This speech genre has two elements, (1) the structure of comments within the forums based on the content of the utterance, and (2) the style and tone of those comments. Commenters address one another in three standardised ways, providing a generic form in which commenters’ responses are articulated in the forums as can be seen in Figure 12. First, commenters use the ‘block quote’ function to quote an entire comment (DuncanW, Comment 19¹¹⁷) second, commenters incorporate elements of the other’s post in their own (Tony, Comment 90¹¹⁸) third, commenters address the recipient without referencing or quoting their comment (Anna, Comment 11¹¹⁹). Comments also contain common forms of criticism, including hostile counterarguments, accusations of misunderstanding arguments, using condescension, sarcasm, feigned emotional evaluative responses, patronisation and insults. Extra verbal communication in the form of capital letters and the excessive use of punctuation marks to emphasise emotive elements are also in evidence.

¹¹⁷ ‘The Wrong War in the Wrong Place. Every day we linger there means more lives wasted’, Max Hastings, 08.03.12

¹¹⁸ ‘Talk About Adding Insult to Injury’, Richard Littlejohn, 19.08.11

¹¹⁹ ‘Tabak’s Secrets and the Baffling rules of ‘Justice’’, Suzanne Moore, 31.10.11

Fig. 12: Three standardised comments containing ‘criticisable validity claims’ within *RightMinds* forums

	Article	Comments	Repertoires & Genres
1.	‘The Wrong War in the Wrong Place. Every day we linger there means more lives wasted’, Max Hastings, 08.03.12	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It is wrong of you to say Wrong War Wrong Time Lives Have Been Wasted. What an insult to all those lives that have been lost – bettyboop 2. Maybe you could enlighten the rest of us as to just why it isn't a wrong war? 3. Within days of the troops pulling out it will revert back to...[a]...primitive and tribal country... 4. Can you honestly tell me that that is a good cause for over 400 brave British soldiers to die for ? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Condescending 2. Patronising 3. Internal validation 4. Patronising
2.	‘Talk About Adding Insult to Injury’, Richard Littlejohn, 19.08.11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. `still don't know why I was treated as the criminal by having to produce my documents` Dave 2. Well, its quite simple, really. Its an insurance matter, is all. 3. Now...if the police HAD come out... 4. thats 2 PCs...travel, interviews and statements, say...4 hours filling in forms ...and you've got very few police...available for more...serious crimes... 5. I've been in the same situation as you, and its infuriating... 6. point your finger squarely at Labour, and its...and `target` policies 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Frustration 2. Patronising 3. Capitalisation denotes shouting 4. Internally validated claim 5. Empathy with commenter 6. Condescension
3.	‘Tabak’s Secrets and the Baffling rules of ‘Justice’, Suzanne Moore, 31.10.11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. @ London Zone 2: 2. You are confused as to the definition of murder. 3. what you're talking about is PREMEDITATED murder. 4. The case did not hinge on whether or not she actually INVITED him in – 5. how preposterous would that be! I can't believe some agreed with you! 6. Without a doubt, the correct verdict was reached in the end, and the judge obviously agreed. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Personal address 2. Insulting use of ‘you’ 3. Capitalisation denotes shouting 4. Patronising 5. Feigned surprise 6. Condescension

In order to assess whether commenters within the *RightMinds* forums can be regarded as participating in ‘exchange and critique’, I analyse two comments to ascertain whether, or to what extent ‘normative’ positions are supported by specific ‘criticisable validity claims’. Commenters engaged in presenting arguments supported by specific criticisable validity claims, can be deemed to have the potential for participating in ‘rational-critical’ debates focused on reaching understanding through presenting persuasive arguments and counterarguments (Dahlberg, 2001a). However, Bakhtin’s (1984b) contention is that all speech is value-laden and designed to provoke a response.

Within the present data, the specific criticisable validity claims commenters use to support their arguments can be broken down into two discrete values: external validation and internal validation (Jensen, 2003). According to Jensen (2003) external validation refers to the use of external sources and facts/figures to substantiate claims made, as in this example by KJC in response to an article on David Cameron’s apparent retraction for reform in Europe. He takes the normative position that the EU is corrupt; substantiating his claim with evidence external to the forum, using it to support his view that the UK should leave the EU, yet his comment is more argumentative than reasoned:

I suggest everybody gets hold of a copy of "The Great Deception" which lays out clearly how the EU and its predecessors...have fudged and...ignored its own rules to get where it is today. It states clearly how corrupt the CAP and the Fishery policies are; both to the detriment of UK farmers and fishermen. The day that either the EU disintegrates, or the UK leaves, cannot come a day too soon (Emphasis added, Comment 2¹²⁰).

Internal validation refers to explicit expression of individual viewpoints, attitudes and values to support assertions (Jensen, 2003) as in this comment by Voice of Reason following an article in which the author criticises women who claim they were raped when intoxicated. Voice of Reason takes the position of trying to understand what it would be like for a typical

¹²⁰ ‘Cameron made the weather at the last EU summit. Now he seems to be in retreat’, Nick Wood, 30.01.2012

heterosexual man to experience rape whilst intoxicated. His argument defends women victims of rape, and he bases that defence on his individual attitudes and values on this topic. His viewpoint can be deemed to be ‘reasoned’ in that he justifies his views (Graham & Witschge, 2003) though his arguments cannot be regarded as rational-critical as “the process of rational-critical debate requires four attributes: reasoned and justified validity claims, critical assessment of validity claims, a commitment to coherence, and a commitment to continuity” (Graham & Witschge, 2003:178):

Imagine you are a typical heterosexual man - you go out with a group of male work colleagues and consume vast amounts of alcohol, some of it intentional and some... given to you by your friends. You wake up...in the morning in a filthy room next to a man you don't know and realise that he has had sex with you...Do you feel resigned to the fact that you should have limited your intake of alcohol and put it down to experience? No of course not. You feel disgusted, violated, abused, dirty and frightened. This is the reality of 'date rape' or rape where alcohol is involved. If you think that some women are 'asking for trouble' if they have had more than 2 glasses of wine...turn the tables and imagine how a man would feel if it happened to them (Emphasis added, Comment 49¹²¹).

Comments containing normative positions supported by criticisable validity claims largely comprise single posts in response to another commenter’s views. When commenters do engage in ‘debates’ they tend to be short-lived, most often consisting of a maximum of three comments each¹²². Despite these limitations, by presenting normative positions supported by criticisable validity claims, some commenters demonstrate the potential for participating in the kind of rational-critical debate deemed necessary for Dahlberg’s (2001a) ‘exchange and critique’ criteria. Yet, this can also be applied to commenters who present arguments supported by specific internally validated viewpoints, attitudes and values. The claim to ‘normativity’ should not necessarily be the decisive factor as to whether comments are considered as meeting Dahlberg’s (2001a) criteria. Commenters who exchange views and critique others from ‘non-normative’, rather than ‘normative’ positions should not be

¹²¹ ‘It’s not only rape victims betrayed by the system’, Richard Littlejohn, 20.05.2011

¹²² Though some contributors post significantly more comments as seen when commenters ‘monopolise’ the forums

precluded from discussions regarding online public sphere theory. Their comments and the arguments that support them can still be regarded as valid despite the lack of a ‘normative’ perspective (Jensen, 2003). Moreover, neither of the two positions, ‘normative’ or ‘non-normative’, can be said to be supporting rational-critical debate due to the significant amount of emotional-volitional content in comments, which is not in keeping with Dahlberg’s (2001a) demands.

Having ascertained that some comments can be regarded as ‘normatively’ positioned, whilst others are argued from a ‘non-normative’ viewpoint, yet both are supported by specific ‘criticisable validity claims’, I now move on to the second part of the analysis, style and intonation of utterances. Where it is Bakhtin’s (1986) contention that all speech is value-laden and ascribed with certain qualities designed to provoke responses, and focuses on the emotional-volitional elements of utterances, Dahlberg (2000:75) argues that rational-critical debates in which the ‘force of the better argument’ takes precedence should be undertaken. To assess the extent to which the style and intonation of comments can be regarded as ‘emotional-volitional’ or ‘rational-critical’, in relation to ‘criticisable validity claims’, an exchange between two contributors is analysed.

Comments coded as containing ‘criticisable validity claims’ comprise adversarial characteristics. Of the 1,185 comments coded under ‘criticisable validity claims’, 788 comments are coded as expressively ‘antagonistic’ identifying strong emotional-volitional undertones, with 757 comments coded under the ‘hidden polemic’ style of utterance (Appendix L). This style of utterance affords the present interlocutor a strongly critical stance against the other’s views, and is identifiable when the present commenter quotes or refers to the other’s views in a critical, often sarcastic manner in an apparent attempt to provoke a response (Bakhtin, 1986).

The following exchange is a typical example of normatively presented views supported by criticisable validity claims. As with other debates within the forums each commenter takes up one side of a two-sided argument. In this instance, one who defends individuals as having a genuine claim to disability benefits and one who argues many such claimants are fraudsters. The exchange begins when Laura responds to John's comment following an article in which the author criticises disability charities for public opinion turning against the disabled. Laura's comment is normatively argued from the point of view that not all disabled people are disabled enough to claim disability benefits. This view is supported by externally validated claims such as the different eligibility criteria for claiming the Lower, Middle and Higher Care component of DLA, which can be verified outside the forum. The tone of her comment is patronising and she takes a 'dig' at John's suggestion that only people with severe physical difficulties should be regarded as 'disabled':

Laura @ John, Extract 1:

John ----> you can be disabled, and still be not disabled enough to claim disability benefits. Just because someone can work it doesn't mean they are not disabled. The criteria for DLA...are at the more severe end of the disability spectrum. Many disabled people will not be entitled to it. To receive Lower Rate Care DLA you need to be completely unable to cook, to receive Middle Rate you need to have significant care needs throughout the day or night...For Higher Rate you have to...need constant help throughout the day AND night. For Lower Rate Mobility you need to be unable to navigate an unfamiliar place by yourself...For Higher Rate you need to be unable to walk, or unable to walk very far. Or be someone who is in constant pain and fatigue when walking. It's perfectly possible to have a disability which isn't severe enough for the above (Emphasis added, Comment 151¹²³).

In his response, John uses internally validated claims to express the normative position that some people 'acquire' a disability when certain conditions are redefined; insinuating that people who were not regarded as disabled, become 'disabled' and therefore in need of benefits, representing part of the anti-disability repertoire within the *Daily Mail*¹²⁴.

¹²³ 'If Public Opinion is Turning Against the Disabled, Disability Charities Have Only Themselves to Blame', Steve Doughty, 06.02.12

¹²⁴ "I know of people on incapacity benefit who are out partying every night.... seems to me there is not much assessment of anyone anymore; the only disease/disability some have is idle-it is" (Morn, 2011) and "Time to

John refers to Laura in the ‘third person’, which can be used for ironic purposes but can also be used with the intention to insult someone (Yule 1996:11). He goes on to patronise her using internally validated arguments that disabled people already receiving ‘top whack payments’ manage to return to ‘physically demanding jobs’ and go on ‘adventure holidays’, participating in ‘a full life of benefit-paid activity!’ emphasising his patronisation by exclaiming ‘Hallelujah!!’:

John @ Laura, Extract 2:

LAURA 18.22's comment doesn't invalidate the point I made about "suddenly acquired disability," which can occur when re-defining of a condition takes place! As I've already said, you can be fit for work and have been in a job for years, when you can suddenly find that you are now classed as "disabled" ...and therefore in need of a benefit, which you didn't need before they told you that you were, in fact, "disabled"! ... And no doubt Laura, like the rest of us will have read daily of all those mpeople who have already been declared disabled and receiving top whack payments, who are found to be working at physically demanding jobs, or holidaying on adventure holidays - when they have miraculously returned to a full life of benefit-paid activity! Hallelujha!! (Emphasis added, Comment 152, *ibid*).

Laura responds with a specific externally validated claim, arguing that the definition of ‘disability’ has not changed since the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act. She takes the normative position that her medical problems were not diagnosed at birth but this does not mean she was not disabled from birth. She uses specific internally validated claims based on her own experience, emphasising key points with capital letters, that she had medical problems prior to her diagnosis, but did not know ‘WHAT’ was wrong with her. She argues that when people live with undiagnosed disabilities, they have ‘ALWAYS’ been disabled despite the fact they are undiagnosed. Laura’s tone becomes condescending when she mocks John’s assertion that people ‘suddenly’ become disabled, arguing that some people are ‘pre

get tough with these spongers...1.Mobility cars to be returned to one seater three wheelers...2.Benefits to be payed in food vouchers only...3.All claimants to be...spot check[ed] to make sure they are not moonlighting, rioting or down the pub...4.Passports to be surrendered, if you are too ill to work you are too ill to have holidays. There, problem solved” (Lost in Wales, 2011). ‘Too sick to work, but not too sick to riot: One in eight defendants were on incapacity or disability benefit’, *The Daily Mail*, Jack Doyle, 25.10.11.

diagnosis disabled' 10-15 years prior to being diagnosed with a disability, sarcastically suggesting they are not suddenly told 'oh you're disabled now!':

Laura @ John, Extract 3:

The definition of disability has been the same since the 1995 DDA, that was almost 20 years ago. It hasn't changed recently. I was born disabled but wasn't diagnosed until I was 21, 22 & 23...Just because it's only been 2 years since I was diagnosed as disabled, doesn't mean I didn't have all the problems before...only difference now is that I know WHAT is wrong with me. I wasn't fine for 21 years, told I had Dyspraxia and then I suddenly became disabled, I was ALWAYS disabled. Some people have disabilities which are hard to diagnose, like Lupus. They spend those 10-15 yrs pre diagnosis disabled, then get told why. They don't just get told 'oh you're disabled now!' (Emphasis added, Comment 153, ibid).

John again refers to Laura in the third-person in a patronising tone, mocking her 'failure' to address his normative criticism of the 'many' people declared as totally disabled, who receive the maximum benefits, but still participate in activities that their disability assessments proclaim should be 'impossible'. He refers to 'every-day stories' on fraudulent claims, many of which can be found within the *Daily Mail* forums, further validating his views¹²⁵. John refers to another contributor's post in an attempt to discredit Laura's assertion that the definition of 'disability' has not changed since 1995. He refers to JL's comment which argues that researchers are identifying 'new' disabilities 'almost weekly', with certain 'fashionable' illnesses such as Autism being used to prevent criminals from facing courts. John's tone becomes condescending when suggesting that peoples' disabilities cannot be taken at face value. He demands to know how to stop such 'abuse', suggesting that regular examinations and assessments should not be done by GPs. Instead, using a specific internally-validated claim, he suggests that such examinations and assessments should be carried out by who he perceives to be 'impartial medicos':

¹²⁵ "I knew someone who had a brand new Mazda MX5 specially adapted for her mobility issues, courtesy of her disability benefits!! She also borrowed our ladder to paint the front of her house, she did an admirable job!!" (Anonymous, 2011), and "An acquaintance was retired early on health grounds, but somehow the bad back which was the reason she could no longer do her NHS desk job still allowed her to ride a bike for 20 - 30 miles, or run around with her grandchildren, or go on walking holidays in the Peak District: funny, that!" (Helen, 2011), 'The Great Disability Benefit Free-For-All: Half of Claimants are not Asked to Prove Eligibility', *The Daily Mail*, James Chapman, 15.04.11.

John @ Laura, Extract 4:

LAURA 20.23, in her latest comment failed to mention all those people I referred to who Had been declared as totally disabled, and receiving the maximum payments, and who then went on all those physically draining adventure holidays...which their disability assessments had said was "impossible"! And Laura's suggestion that, "nothing has changed in 20 years" conflicts with all those other commenters, like JL who maintains that researchers are finding new "disabilities" almost weekly - not to mention those latest "fashionable" illnesses like, Autism, Aspergers etc, now so useful for preventing criminals from facing courts etc! The fact is, that taking peoples' word for what they allege is wrong with them, has opened up a giant means of fraud - as the every-day stories we hear and read about confirms - so, what IS the alternative to putting a stop to such abuse, apart from regular examination and assessment by impartial medicos - not local GPs? (Emphasis added, Comment 155, ibid).

In relation to the comments outlined above, and of others they represent, it is clear that some commenters present 'normative' positions, whilst others present 'non-normative' viewpoints, supported by specific externally and/or internally validated criticisable claims. In so doing, these commenters could be regarded as engaging in Dahlberg's 'exchange and critique' criteria. However, whilst some commenters certainly engage in an 'exchange' of views, there is little evidence of 'critique'. Instead, commenters engage in presenting and defending their views, often 'criticising' the views of others using emotional-volitional language, rather than engaging in a dialogue in which the views of others are considered on merit thus contributing to understanding and building consensus. As such, whilst the potential for 'exchange and critique' is in evidence, commenters do not engage in 'rational-critical' debates and therefore do not meet Dahlberg's (2001) criteria.

Minimal 'Dogmatic Assertions' within *Comment is Free*

It is Dahlberg's (2000:625) contention that dogmatic assertions consist of "pre-set positions, where participants are unprepared to revise their positions in the light of what others post". He argues that when commenters present dogmatic assertions they are not 'acting rationally' (Kasap, 2013:226). The lack of reciprocal exchanges of views, supported by specific validity claims limit the capacity for commenters to participate in rational-critical 'exchange and critique' Dahlberg's (2001). Within the present data, of the 6,792 comments

coded under ‘exchange and critique’, 2,533 comments are coded as ‘dogmatic’ (Appendix G). Analysis also shows that 1,299 of those comments are addressed to other commenters (Appendix M). It is Dahlberg’s (2001) contention that by reducing the number of dogmatically asserted posts within online fora; contributors will be more likely to engage in the type of rational-critical debate demanded by the public sphere.

Dahlberg (2004:33) argues that many commenters engage in ‘dogmatic ranting’ rather than rational deliberation. Consequently, commenters rarely acknowledge criticisms made against them, and are unwilling to change their position in the course of a debate. Within the *RightMinds* forums, comments coded as ‘dogmatic’ contain a high degree of emotional-volitional content, with 1,619 comments coded as expressively ‘antagonistic’ (Appendix M). Thus, both a Dahlbergian analysis of these ‘dogmatically asserted’ comments, and a Bakhtinian analysis of these intrinsically dialogic interactions is used to assess whether, and to what extent dogmatic exchanges are manifested within the *Comment is Free* forums.

The speech genre associated with dogmatic exchanges between contributors comprise short statements or points presented without reasons for assertions, and are characterised by condescending, sarcastic, patronising overtones and personal insults. These hostile exchanges comprise two elements: (1) the structure of comments based on their content, and (2) the style and intonation of comments. Contributors present their comments in three standardised ways, providing a generic form of response (Figure 13). First, quoting an entire comment (NunOfTheAbove, Comment 27¹²⁶), secondly, referring to, or quoting part of a comment (Indifferentbird, Comment 262¹²⁷), thirdly, addressing the recipient without reference to, or quotation of, their comment (Kerfuffling, Comment 39¹²⁸).

¹²⁶ ‘Criminalising squatting will merely make the problem worse’, Claire Sandbrook, 04.07.11

¹²⁷ ‘Being a slut, to my mind, was mostly fun - wearing and doing what you liked’, Suzanne Moore, 14.05.11

¹²⁸ ‘Just a phase? No, the student protests over fees are worthy of respect’, Stefan Collini, 14.03.12

Fig. 13: Three standardised ‘dogmatic’ comments within *Comment is Free* forums

	Article	Comment	Conventions
1.	‘Criminalising squatting will merely make the problem worse’, Claire Sandbrook, 04.07.11	1. @kg541"Today's police are neither trained nor equipped to deal with evictions ...so what makes you think they will turn up to evict squatters?" 2. Plod will prioritise whatever the ruling elite want. 3. Today cracking protestor skulls, tomorrow evicting squatters, rarely checking white collar crime	1. Condescending 2. Sarcasm 3. Repertoire ‘Police brutality’
2.	‘Being a slut, to my mind, was mostly fun - wearing and doing what you liked’, Suzanne Moore, 14.05.11	1. Dummjanjek, "the "signalling" of women whom they want to mate with, is fraught with uncertainty...men alone cannot be blamed for making errors" 2. Eh? Why don't you dispense with the 'signal' reading and try to hold a conversation? 3. It could go something like: You: 'want to have sex with me?' Woman: 'no' And then you don't.	1. Condescending 2. ‘you’ as a form of insult 3. Patronising
3.	‘Just a phase? No, the student protests over fees are worthy of respect’ Stefan Collini, 14.03.12	1. Response to BeyondCardboard, So, no answer then. 3. Just a rant, a kneejerking myopic rant from a very right wing ideologue. Figures.	1. Condescending 2. Personal insult

Dahlberg (2001a) argues that commenters are compelled to participate in debates with limited space to express one’s views, indicating that commenters may not necessarily be consciously choosing to make dogmatic assertions. Instead, their contributions could be shaped by the medium through which they choose to communicate their views (Crystal, 2001). However, there is no discernible character count for *Comment is Free* forums, and as such, restrictions as to comment length can be regarded as playing no part in determining the ‘dogmatic’ nature of posts.

Having established that commenters post ‘dogmatic’ comments within the *Comment is Free* forums, the second part of the analysis, which concerns the style and intonation of

utterances, is outlined below. Whilst Dahlberg (2001a) argues that debates must contain rational-critical arguments, Bakhtin (1986) argues that high emotional-volitional content is an important factor when engaging in debates, as it is likely to provoke active responses (Gardiner, 2004:36). Of the 2,533 comments coded as ‘dogmatically asserted’, 1,619 are coded as expressively ‘antagonistic’, with 1,247 comments coded under the ‘hidden polemic’ style of utterance (Appendix M). Thus, a strong degree of emotional-volitional content is combined with a highly critical style of utterance, which demands reference to, or quotation of, the content to which the present interlocutor is responding (Bakhtin, 1986).

Whilst emotional-volitional content is identifiable in exchanges of dogmatic assertions between commenters, such exchanges are limited. An example of such an exchange can be seen in the following extract, which is taken from a forum following an article on the student protests over fees¹²⁹. Two commenters become embroiled in a dogmatic exchange of insults rather than focusing on the topic in hand. EllisWyatt responds to Alexander’s comment, which consists of normatively argued views supported by criticisable validity claims, which will be explored later in this chapter. He patronisingly questions Alexander’s views and condescendingly discredits his arguments:

EllisWyatt @ Alexander, Extract 1:

Response to Alexander, *Why is it crippling just because it is a big number if the repayments are...taken at source out of surplus income of 15% above £21k?* As far as I can see *the only issue is less post tax income in their pocket...but probably compensated for by generally higher income for able graduates with good degrees from good universities. How does having that debt restrict them in a unique and malign way? The job market is utterly irrelevant...good graduates will still get good jobs, but to be blunt if some kid comes out school with a handful of Es and a D at A level then university is not the place for them* (Comment 98¹³⁰).

Alexander posts a dogmatic assertion in response to EllisWyatt in the form of a single condescending statement apparently intended to discredit his argument:

¹²⁹ Whilst the subject of the comments do not form part of the analysis, it is necessary for the general content to be known so that evidence of exchange and critique can be identified.

¹³⁰ ‘Just a phase? No, the student protests over fees are worthy of respect’, Stefan Collini, 14.03.12

Alexander @ EllisWyatt, Extract 2:

Response to EllisWyatt, *Your arguments are getting very circular* (Emphasis added, Comment 99, *ibid*).

EllisWyatt replies in a strongly sarcastic tone. He condescendingly questions Alexander's points, demanding justification for his views. He opens his comment with 'sorry', and requests that Alexander 'please' explain his arguments 'please' as he is 'missing' the point. This patronising request for explanation can be deemed to be in guise of ironic 'over-politeness' (Kumon-Nakamura et al, 1995) as opposed to a genuine request:

EllisWyatt @ Alexander, Extract 3:

Response to Alexander, *Sorry you are having a laugh, circular? Coming from you:*

"debt is crippling because its big"

Why is it too big?

"because its crippling the students who take it out"

Please explain in what way the proposal would cripple students who take on the debt, please clearly I am missing your point (Emphasis added, Comment 101, *ibid*).

Alexander's response is condescending. He patronisingly suggests EllisWyatt does not reply, re-emphasising the apparent 'circularity' of his arguments:

Alexander @ EllisWyatt, Extract 4:

Response to EllisWyatt, *Large debt + young person = crippled. In any case, don't reply. Just keep repeating yourself* (Emphasis added, Comment 109, *ibid*).

It is precisely this 'circularity' of dogmatic assertions that concerns Dahlberg (2000:187) with regard to online debates, arguing that "debates often turn into repetitive exchanges between dogmatic interlocutors unprepared to reconsider their values, claims and assumptions". This argument is supported by Streck's (1998:44) research in which he suggests that online exchanges "are woefully circular" and in which "discussion reduces to the same people saying the same things in the same ways". However, within the present data 2,533 out of 6,792 commenters post 'dogmatic assertions' to the forums (Appendix G), suggesting that these types of interactions are not dominant in *Comment is Free*, contradicting Dahlberg's (2006) concerns as to the level of their existence in online debates.

‘Criticisable Validity Claims’: Criticism or Critique?

Dahlberg (2001a) argues that online deliberation reproduces the basic structure of rational-critical debates and approximates certain requirements of the public sphere. In order to participate in ‘exchange and critique’, contributors must present comments from a normative backdrop against which assertions can be criticised, and from which reciprocal exchanges of views can take place. Present data indicates that of the 6,792 comments coded under ‘exchange and critique’, 4,259 comments are coded as containing specific ‘criticisable validity claims’ (Appendix G). Of those, 2,618 are in response to comment content (Appendix M). Following Bakhtin’s (1986) theory of utterance that all utterances are a link in a chain of speech communication, to what extent do arguments supported by ‘criticisable validity claims’, encourage debates in the forums? In order to answer this question, comments must be assessed not only in Dahlbergian terms, but the extent to which commenters participate in dialogic exchanges on Bakhtinian terms.

Bohman (1996:16) suggests that difference and disagreement between contributors are primarily features of deliberation. According to Aikens’ (1997:136) research, within the context of online discussions there is a strong incentive for commenters to adhere to the normative values of the community. As such, arguments supported by criticisable validity claims can be deemed to be arising from the anticipation of disagreement, in which particular justifications are used that befit the level of disagreement, and in which argumentation is adapted to the context in which those disagreements occur (van Eemeren, 2002:79). Ruiz et al’s (2011) study found that in *Guardian.co.uk* “contributors try to support their views with arguments. This does not mean that they seek consensus, but they try to beat opposed views with the strength of reasons instead of with the rule of intimidation”. As such, debates between contributors within *Comment is Free* are intrinsically dialogic, incorporating many different tones and viewpoints within the text whilst substantiating their claims with a variety

of arguments. These dialogic posts are guided by particular speech genres within the *Comment is Free* forums.

The intrinsically dialogic interactions supported by ‘criticisable validity claims’ within the *Comment is Free* forums comprise dialogic responses to comment content. This speech genre comprises two elements, (1) the structure of comments within the forums based on the content of the utterance, and (2) the style and tone of those comments. Commenters address one another in three generic ways, which contain conventional modes of critique including using condescending overtones, patronisation and insults (Figure 14). In the first example, the commenter uses the “block quote” function to quote an entire comment (HelenWilsonMK, Comment 80¹³¹) in the second example, the commenter refers to and quotes the part of the comment to which they are responding (Rusticred, Comment 195¹³²) and in the third example, the commenter addresses the recipient without directly referring to, or quoting their utterance (GordonMack, Comment 122¹³³).

¹³¹ ‘Being a slut, to my mind, was mostly fun - wearing and doing what you liked’, Suzanne Moore, 14.05.11

¹³² ‘The Myth of Race’, Deborah Ore, 05.05.11

¹³³ ‘Our crisis is not about trust. It’s that we no longer agree on basic values’, Madeline Bunting, 24.07.11

Fig. 14: Three standardised comments containing ‘criticisable validity claims’ within *Comment is Free* forums

	Article	Comment	Conventions
1.	‘Being a slut, to my mind, was mostly fun - wearing and doing what you liked’, Suzanne Moore, 14.05.11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. FreeBethnalGreen “this is just middle-class hipster girls importing problems to react against. Have any British police officers lectured young women on what they can and can't wear? Nowheresville” 2. You are so wrong in this. 3. The British police regularly take no action against rapists...the standard defence... base[s] the whole case on the victims sexual history and dress sense. 4. women need to speak out a say no more. Men need to start taking responsibility for themselves. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Condescension 2. Moralising 3. External validity claims 4. Condescension
2.	‘The Myth of Race’, Deborah Ore, 05.05.11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Response to KinkyChristian, "But evolutionary changes can occur very fast. In...our species we do see marked differences...from blood chemistry to...understand[ing] tonal languages." 2. I would say that we have changes in our gene pool by mutation which drives evolution... for example it has been determined that a few hundred people account for the non african homo sapiens in asia, australasia and Europe 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Condescending 2. Externally validated counterclaims
3.	‘Our crisis is not about trust. Its that we no longer agree on basic values’, Madeline Bunting, 24.07.11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. @Pragmatism, I take your point but...I believe working class culture has been denigrated ... through embourgeoisement. 2. Proletarian culture...was a fairly sincere expression of working class values...There was a lot of solidarity...overwritten by attempts to characterise the working class as feckless...and criminal 3. It's also a pity that...people believe they are middle class simply because...[they have]...more purchasing power. In the process I think they're buying into an empty, selfish, dream...turning their back on a lot that was of real value 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Internal validation about working classes 3. External validity claims about proletarian culture 5. Condescension

In order to assess whether commenters within the *Comment is Free* forums can be regarded as participating in ‘exchange and critique’, I analyse two comments to ascertain whether, or the extent to which commenters present ‘normative’ positions supported by specific ‘criticisable validity claims’. Whilst it is Bakhtin’s (1984b) contention that all speech is value-laden and designed to provoke a response, Dahlberg (2001a) would argue that such emotional-volitional language is anathema to rational-critical dialogue, which focuses on reaching understanding through presenting persuasive arguments and counterarguments. Within the present data, commenters’ present ‘normative’ and ‘non-normative’ viewpoints, in the course of their posts, and support their views with specific criticisable validity claims. The criticisable validity claims commenters use to support their arguments can be broken down into two discrete values: external validation and internal validation (Jensen, 2003).

According to Jensen (2003) external validation refers to the use of external sources and facts/figures to substantiate claims made, as in this example by AndreBreton in response to an article on the go ahead in the rise of tuition fees¹³⁴. He argues that there is money available to make higher education free to everyone but it is not being utilised or money is being wasted. He substantiates his claim with evidence from external sources including figures based on UK wealth, the distribution of wages compared to profits, wasting money on war and bailing out the banks:

AndreBreton @ Peterbracken:

@ peterbracken "It is not feasible to fund an increase 5% to 40% of young people in higher education from the public purse. Surely you can see that."

I always wonder with people like yourself why you can't see that *as the 5th richest country in the world we could EASILY afford to educate everybody...The 1000 richest people in the UK whose wealth is around £350 billion got £77 billion richer last year and you say there is no money? Between mid-2009 and early 2010, 89% of all new income produced...-£27bn produced, £24bn went to profits, and only £2bn went to wages and you say there is no money? Bombing Libya, 3 million pounds a day? cost of other wars, Billions...and you say there is no money? Our banks, bailed*

¹³⁴ Whilst the subject of the comments do not form part of the analysis, it is necessary for the general content to be known so that evidence of exchange and critique can be identified.

out to the tune of £850 Billion pounds by the public, that's where the money went! £9 Billion found to bail out banks in Ireland, more needed for a second bank bail out coming hence...cut back on Education, privatise the NHS, decimate our civil society and all while having useful idiots like yourself say "there is no money"! We can afford a free education system, just as we can afford a decent life for everyone (Emphasis added, Comment 43¹³⁵).

Internal validation refers to explicit expression of individual viewpoints, attitudes and values to support assertions (Jensen, 2003) as in this comment by Achilles0200 following an article on the continuation of oppression in Egypt despite the Revolution. His comment is not presented from a 'normative' position based on reasoned arguments aimed at reaching understanding, though discursive democracy does not only consist of rational argument, storytelling and personal experience are also used (Dunne, 2009). Therefore, his views can be considered as appropriately 'discursive' through him using specific internally validated criticisable claims (Jensen, 2003). Achilles0200 responds to ExArmy's comment from the viewpoint that there is a moral imperative to intervene when Governments are accused of, or found to be, persecuting their own people. His attitudes and values concerning the necessity of moral intervention are clearly defined:

Achilles0200 @ ExArmy:

ExArmy, "So when do you want my mates who are still serving to go in there and kick the crap out of them, As you have pointed out so many times its only us westerners with ability and resources and the moral strength to kick them for their own good into more forward thinking enlightened times."

Thank God you weren't around in 1939 when the Nazis went into Poland... I have made it clear before that we can't intervene everywhere all the time...The fact that we can't intervene everywhere doesn't mean that we should intervene nowhere. If a thug is kicking the crap out of an old lady I suppose you would object to kicking the crap out of the thug?...If systems allow for peaceful representation...subject to the freely expressed will of the majority there would be no excuse for intervention...Who would not want all states to peacefully settle their own affairs. Where regimes ruthlessly butcher their own people there is a moral imperative to do something! (Emphasis added, Comment 63¹³⁶).

¹³⁵ 'Tuition fees go ahead marks the betrayal of a generation', Michael Chessum, 13.07.11

¹³⁶ 'The Egyptian Army's Mask has Slipped', Austin Mackell, 22.06.11

Whilst some commenters present ‘normative’ positions, others focus on presenting arguments from a ‘non-normative’ viewpoint, with both kinds of arguments being supported by specific criticisable validity claims. Whilst such comments largely fall within the 2,101 single comments posted to the forums, when commenters do engage in ‘debates’ they post, on average, 4.43 comments each (Appendix U). Though the number of comments exchanged is much higher in some threads, particularly when the forum is ‘monopolised’¹³⁷. By presenting normative positions supported by criticisable validity claims, commenters can be deemed to be participating in the type of exchanges needed to satisfy Dahlberg’s (2001a) ‘exchange and critique’ criteria. Yet, commenters who present ‘non-normative’ viewpoints cannot be discredited for their particular stance. These commenters also offer specific criticisable validity claims to support their assertions and therefore their views also complement online public sphere discourse.

Having ascertained that comments can be regarded as ‘normatively’ and ‘non-normatively’ positioned whilst being supported by specific ‘criticisable validity claims’, I now move on to the second part of the analysis, style and intonation of utterances. In order to fully assess the style and intonation of comments in relation to criticisable validity claims, both a Dahlbergian and Bakhtinian analysis is undertaken. Where Dahlberg (2000) focuses on the ‘rational-critical’ element of commenting, Bakhtin focuses on the emotional-volitional aspects of utterances, in which the value-laden, moral and aesthetic qualities of utterances are designed to provoke responses and explore broader perspectives (Gardiner, 2004:36).

Within the present data, of 4,259 comments coded as containing ‘criticisable validity claims’ (Appendix G), 2,868 were coded as expressively ‘antagonistic’ (Appendix M), with 2,035 coded under the ‘hidden polemic’ and 1,432 under the ‘parodic’ styles of utterance.

¹³⁷ For example, in the forum following the article ‘Turkey is not a free Country’, Hevallo posted 14 comments to Laiklik, and received 15 replies from her.

The 'hidden polemic' style of utterance (Bakhtin, 1986) is identified when the present commenter quotes or refers to the other's views in a critical, often sarcastic manner in an attempt to provoke a response. The 'parodic' style of utterance (Bakhtin, 1986) is identified in comments in which the present commenter critically responds to the comments of others in a point-for-point manner, resulting in a hostile and provocative exchange of views.

The following exchange is a typical example of 'non-normatively' presented views supported by specific internally and externally validated criticisable validity claims. It comes from a forum following an article on how democratic Libya's opposition is. As with other debates within the forums each commenter takes up one side of a two-sided argument. EnglishBernie defends Gaddafi concerning his alleged poor treatment of his citizens and against dubious accusations and reports he considers have no merit. SawaAlZaman criticises the Gaddafi regime instead supporting the Transitional National Council. The debate is ongoing when English Bernie posts the following patronising comment, discrediting SawaAlZaman's optimism and criticism of the old regime and sarcastically referring to him as 'mate'. His comment contains an array of facts and figures to support his arguments without providing sources:

EnglishBernie @ SawaAlZaman, Extract 1:

"Best of luck to the Transitional National Council in their essential work helping to bring a more just and equitable future to the long-suffering Libyan people."? What? This is what he was doing to his own people".

*ELOQUENT FACTS OF THE SOCIALIST LIBYA: * GDP per capita – \$14,192. * Unemployment benefit - \$730. * Each family member subsidized by the state gets annually \$1.000... *For every newborn is paid \$7.000. * The bride and groom receive a \$64 thousand to purchase flats. * Major taxes and levies prohibited.. * Education and medicine are free. * Educ.Internships abroad - at government expense... * Part of pharmacies - with free dispensing. * Loans for buying a car and an apartment - no interest... * Buying a car up to 50% paid by the State. * No Payment for electricity for the population. * Sales and use of alcohol is prohibited. * Petrol is cheaper than water. 1 liter of gasoline - \$0.14. That doesn't look very 'long suffering' to me mate. Do you think the Libyan people will still have these things under an Islamist rule? (Emphasis added, Comment 52,ibid).*

SawaAlZaman's response is equally patronising, particularly noticeable by referring to EnglishBernie as 'Bernard', demanding proof for his assertions and condescendingly discrediting his arguments as 'snide', before using Kumon-Nakamura et al's (1995) notion of ironic over-politeness to 'thank' him:

SawaAlZaman @ EnglishBernie, Extract 2:

"That doesn't look very 'long suffering' to me mate. Do you think the Libyan people will still have these things under an Islamist rule?"

Two things please, Bernard; a link to the actual source for those "this is what he was doing to his own people" figures - and an explanation from you regarding your snide and unfounded insinuation that "Islamist rule" is the likely outcome of an end to despotic Qaddafi rule. Thank you (Comment 64, ibid).

EnglishBernie is contrite in his opening statement as to any 'inappropriateness' on his part. He goes on to patronisingly suggest that the information is easy to find on the Internet, condescendingly suggesting SawaAlZaman might find a link in his comment 'useful' and quoting from the article therein:

EnglishBernie@ SawaAlZaman, Extract 3:

SawaAlZaman. First of all my apologies if you found my comment inappropriate, it wasn't intended in that way. I don't have the link for the original information on Libya ... I'm sure you'll have no trouble if you look. You might find this link to Pravda informative. http://english.pravda.ru/hotspots/crimes/25-03-2011/117336-reason_for_war_oil-0/ If I might quote from the article: "*The Administration has failed...The solution is for the Libyan people to directly receive oil revenues and decide what to do with them,*" Gaddafi said in a speech broadcast on state television... the Libyan leader urged a radical reform...[but] senior Libyan government officials voted to delay Gaddafi's plans... Gaddafi affirmed before a public meeting: "*My dream during all these years was to give the power and wealth directly to the people.*" So...another big LIE falls by the wayside, the false image of Ghaddafi the dictator who robs from his people (Emphasis added, Comment 72, ibid).

He goes on to suggest that the CIA, other intelligence agencies, mercenaries, foreign elements and Al Qaeda have banded together to discredit Gaddafi through photographs portraying false events such as anti-Gaddafi demonstrations, heavily-armed terrorists fighting against no-one, reports of him fleeing the country, bombings and reports of attacks against 'unarmed civilians', though he provides no source for these claims.

In the same comment EnglishBernie goes on to cite two documents that back Gaddafi's arguments concerning Al Qaeda, quoting from one at length, to add weight to his claims that Gaddafi is not the 'crazy' dictator he is portrayed to be:

EnglishBernie @ SawaAlZaman (continuation, Extract 4):

They try to portray Ghaddafi as crazy when he speaks of fighting Al Qaeda and now they have to admit it's true. *Two documents strongly back Gaddafi on this issue, according to the findings of Alexander Cockburn.*

"The first is a secret cable to the State Department from the US embassy in Tripoli in 2008, part of the WikiLeaks trove, entitled, "Extremism in Eastern Libya," which revealed that this area is rife with anti-American, pro-jihad sentiment.

The second...set of documents, are the so-called Sinjar Records, captured al-Qaeda documents that fell into American hands in 2007...The West Point analysts' statistical study of the al-Qaeda personnel records concludes that one country provided "far more" foreign fighters in per capita...than any other: namely, Libya."

And there is this also: " The NCLO web site (Arabic) carries a document... dated February 15th...which clearly spells out NCLO's objections to Qaddafi's rule. ... Qaddafi has closed an Islamic university...has forbidden some Islamist publications, and has thrown thousands of Islamist activists into jail...has urged to put the Qur'an on the shelf...has made fun of the Islamic veil...has dared to say that Christians and Jews should be allowed to visit Mecca...has rejected the Hadith and Sunnah, and said he follows the Qur'an alone." (Emphasis added, Comment 72, ibid).

SawaAlZaman responds with a great deal of sarcasm, particularly noticeable from his opening comment of 'pull the other one, Bernard' and referring to him as 'Bernie' further on. His tone is patronising and he attacks EnglishBernie's character due to his omission of any reference to Hitler, sarcastically suggesting it discredits his whole argument. He demands evidence for EnglishBernie's 'facts and figures' appearing to attack his credibility for being unable to verify the 'authenticity' of his sources and that he could have merely 'plucked' them from cyberspace. However, SawaAlZaman provides no sources to support his own assertions that for decades 'large swathes' of the Libyan people suffered 'fear and brutal repression' under the Gaddafi regime:

SawaAlZaman @ EnglishBernie, Extract 5:

"First of all my apologies if you found my comment inappropriate, it wasn't intended in that way."

Pull the other one, Bernard – your...insinuation that "Islamist rule" is the next phase in Libyan history is a deliberate attempt to discredit this new Libyan revolution

...you are also...dismissing the fear and brutal repression suffered ...by large swathes of the Libyan people. All a bit of a joke to you is it? And you forgot to insert

"One can only heartily agree on Gaddafi's statement...History will surely judge them on the same page as Adolph Hitler."

'Right... I'm not surprised you left that bit out - it rather discredits the whole piece... And Bernie...what about the source of your 'facts & figures' on how Libyans had it so good under Qaddafi? [If] ou don't have the...original information, you merely 'reformatted' it from memory then?

"They're easy to find on the internet though and I'm sure you'll have no trouble if you look"..?

I would like to know where the stuff you posted comes from...to verify its authenticity and...read it in context as opposed to...being plucked out of cyberspace and plonked down here as [a]...point scoring exercise (Emphasis added, Comment 91, ibid).

EnglishBernie's response is strongly defensive arguing he provided a verifiable source and 'left nothing out'. He condescendingly suggests SawaAlZaman's accusations are 'flawed' appearing to attack his character and credibility by referring to other forums in which he can be deemed to be dogmatically asserting his views rather than being open to debate. At this point EnglishBernie leaves the debate and posts no further comments to the forum:

EnglishBernie @ SawaAlZaman, Extract 6:

SawaAlZaman, no, I don't find it funny at all. I had a good friend of many years in Libya until she had to leave after the bombing started. We've spoken many times since she returned to her home Country. So no, I don't just get my information from the internet. I posted the full link from Pravda and anybody could read it. I left nothing out. Your insinuation that I'm 'cherry picking' information is flawed. But, I've seen you post on any article about Libya over the last few days and I can see that your mind is made up no matter what facts are presented to you. So, I'll leave this rather pointless discussion (Emphasis added, Comment 103, ibid).

In relation to the comments outlined above, and of others they represent, it is clear that whilst some commenters present 'normative' positions, others post 'non-normatively' argued viewpoints, with both types of arguments being supported by specific externally and/or internally validated criticisable validity claims. Yet, there is a lack of definitive evidence of reaching understanding or consensus building. However, whilst commenters certainly present specific criticisable validity claims, there is more evidence of 'criticism' than 'critique'. Commenters largely engage in presenting and defending their views, often 'criticising' the views of others using emotional-volitional language (Bakhtin, 1984) rather

than engaging in a dialogue in which the views of others are considered on merit. As such, whilst the potential for ‘exchange and critique’ is in evidence within the present data, commenters do not fully participate in the type of ‘rational-critical’ debate demanded by online public sphere theory.

Chapter Discussion

Rational-critical discourse involves engaging in reciprocal critique of normative positions that are provided with reasons and thus are criticisable, that is, open to critique rather than dogmatically asserted (Dahlberg, 2001a:ii).

This chapter examined whether, and to what extent ‘exchange and critique’ is present within *WHYS*, *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums. Dahlberg’s (2001:625) definition of dogmatic assertions suggests they comprise “pre-set positions, where participants are unprepared to revise their positions in the light of what others post”. Across all three forums analysed within this study, each contains ‘dogmatic assertions’. The prevalence of ‘dogmatic assertions’ is highest within *WHYS* forums in which contributors are restricted to posting short comments, largely due to the avenue through which they choose to post their views, specifically *Twitter* and *SMS*. Comments contain either high or low emotional-volitional content (Bakhtin, 1984) though this has no effect on debates as commenters are unable to interact within the forums. As such Dahlberg’s (2001) assertions concerning the limited space in which commenters can post their views and the likely omission of ‘criticisable validity claims’ is substantiated with the *WHYS* forums.

However, commenters within the *RightMinds* and the *Comment is Free* forums do not experience these restrictions, with no discernible character limit when posting comments. In the *RightMinds* forums, 759 contributors posted ‘dogmatic assertions’, though only 47 were addressed to other contributors (Appendix L), compared to 2,533 ‘dogmatic assertions’ in the *Comment is Free* forums with 1,299 addressed to other contributors (Appendix M). Despite this disparity, only a limited number of commenters participate in ‘dogmatic’ exchanges of

views within the two sets of forums. Comments are imbued with high emotional-volitional content in both *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums with common conventions of critique comprising condescension, sarcasm, irony and personal insults through which commenters appear to attack the credibility and character of the other contributor. As such dogmatically asserted comments within *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* do not meet Dahlberg's (2001) 'exchange and critique' criteria which demands reciprocal exchanges of rational-critical arguments.

For commenters to participate in 'exchange and critique' they must post comments containing 'normative' positions supported by specific 'criticisable validity claims' (Dahlberg, 2001). These criteria are in evidence across all three forums, yet 'non-normative' viewpoints supported by specific 'criticisable validity claims' are also in evidence. This suggests Dahlberg's (2001a) demands for 'normative' positions are not fully substantiated as discursive democracy does not only consist of rational argument, storytelling and personal experience are also used (Dunne, 2009). Within *WHYS* forums, 63 comments out of 199 were coded as containing arguments supported by specific 'criticisable validity claims' 54 of which were 'internally' validated, and 9 'externally' validated (Appendix E). Yet, comments are imbued with emotional-volitional content (Bakhtin, 1984). Furthermore, commenters cannot participate in reciprocal exchanges of views within *WHYS* forums. As such, whilst commenters present arguments supported by specific 'criticisable validity claims', thus meeting part of Dahlberg's (2001) 'exchange and critique' criteria, the lack of interaction and the inclusion of emotional-volitional content is anathema to the type of 'rational-critical' debates that 'exchange and critique' requires.

In comparing the *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums, commenters within *Comment is Free* post a marginally higher degree of comments containing 'criticisable validity claims' at 63% (Appendix G) than in *RightMinds* at 62% (Appendix F), however, the

difference is more marked when considering that commenters within *Comment is Free* address their comments to other contributors in 61% of posts (Appendix M), in comparison to 20% in *RightMinds* (Appendix L). This suggests that contributors within *Comment is Free* are more open to participating in debates (Dahlberg, 2000:75).

Commenters in both the *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums post comments containing ‘normative’ and ‘non-normative’ positions supported by specific externally and internally validated criticisable validity claims. External validation comprises facts/figures and sources external the forums such as legal Acts, statistics and reports. Internal validation comprises individual views, attitudes and values expressed, for example, through putting oneself in the shoes of rape victims and challenging prevailing views on blame, or considering when the time is right for ‘moral intervention’. Such claims strengthen arguments and counterarguments within the forums and contribute toward a Dahlbergian (2001) type of ‘rational-critical’ debate comparable to his ‘exchange and critique’ criteria.

However, in both the *RightMinds* and the *Comment is Free* forums, ‘normative’ and ‘non-normative’ arguments and their supporting specific ‘criticisable validity claims’ contain a high degree of emotional-volitional content (Bakhtin, 1984). Comments contain shouting denoted by capital letters, over-use of punctuation marks, sarcasm, ironic over-politeness, mockery and personal insults. Yet, this does not deter commenters from continuing to participate in debates. This suggests that despite the inclusion of emotional-volitional content (Bakhtin, 1984) commenters continue to substantiate their arguments in the form of specific criticisable validity claims. As such, whilst emotional-volitional content (Bakhtin, 1984) is anathema to Dahlberg’s conception (2000:75) of ‘rational-critical’ debate, commenters present arguments and counterarguments supported by specific criticisable validity claims very much in the vein of his ‘exchange and critique’ criteria.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The present research was designed to address some of the limitations of previous studies on the online public sphere, specifically in online news comment forums as outlined in Chapter 1. The most common methodological limitations in the existing literature are the use of small samples, lack of comparison between media types, and single-method research designs using content analysis. In contrast, the present study has adduced evidence from 9,424 comments, drawn from 78 forums in three British mainstream news online comment forums over a thirteen month time frame. Data from a ‘quality’ newspaper, *The Guardian*, a ‘tabloid’ newspaper *The Daily Mail* and a public service broadcaster the *BBC* are included and compared during the course of the analysis. A systematic small scale content analysis was chosen for the initial stage of this research in order to identify and track patterns within the data, which was then complemented by a larger, detailed sociological discourse analysis to surmise what those patterns suggest about debates within the forums more broadly. To ensure a high standard of rigour and transparency, the quality assurance techniques of thick description, and procedural clarity through CAQDAS were applied to the research.

Limitations

This study focused on three of Dahlberg’s (2001a) online public sphere theory criteria ‘autonomy’, ‘discursive inclusion and equality’ and ‘exchange and critique’ whilst omitting ‘reflexivity’, ‘ideal role-taking’ and ‘sincerity’. The first three criteria were chosen to undertake an analysis of online news comment forums to assess the effects of external influence, internal influence and types of deliberations within online news comment forums. In comparison to other research using Dahlberg’s (2001a) online public sphere theory, such as Robertson et al (2010) who included all six of Dahlberg’s criteria, the use of only three

criteria in this study can be considered a limitation as I have not incorporated all of these criteria into my analysis. Whilst the size of the sample in this study is significantly higher than in similar online public sphere research, it is limited compared to the number of articles and subsequent comments available in online news comment forums. Moreover, this mixed methods approach of a small content analysis complemented by a larger discourse analysis means that generalisations from these findings cannot be made about online news comment forums more broadly. A larger study, with a greater degree of quantitative analysis, would be needed before generalisations concerning online news comment forums and their relationship to the online public sphere could be drawn.

Results from the Dahlbergian Analysis

In Chapter 3, I examined whether, and the extent to which, commenters participate in ‘autonomous debates’ within three news online comment forums. The level of autonomy was measured against Dahlberg’s (2001a) ‘autonomy’ criteria consisting of freedom from State and commercial influence, commenters discussing issues of greatest concern to them, and contributors participating in ‘rational-critical’ debates. Commenters within *WHYS* are severely restricted in terms of participating in debates being such that contributors can respond to article content only. Consequently, contributors are unable to raise, and discuss, issues of greatest concern to them in response to other contributors’ comments.

In contrast, commenters participating in *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums have the opportunity to respond to both article content and comment content., and to raise and discuss issues of greatest concern to them. However, many of these discussions are imbued with recurrent themes and repertoires found within other articles and comments within the *RightMinds* and the *Comment is Free* forums. Contributors to *RightMinds* forums tend to reproduce themes and repertoires on particular subjects across the sample indicating that ‘autonomy’ from influences is not achieved either on a micro level (within a particular

forum) or on a macro level (within *The Daily Mail*). Conversely, whilst there is evidence of preceding themes and repertoires in many of the debates within the *Comment is Free* forums, there is also evidence of contributors discussing issues that can be deemed to be outside the remit of preceding articles and comments. Consequently, contributors to *Comment is Free* achieve a sense of ‘autonomy’ on a micro level (within a particular forum) but not on a macro level (within *Comment is Free*).

In Chapter 4, I examined ‘discursive inclusion and equality’. The first part of the analysis focused on the gendered pseudonyms commenters ascribe themselves as a measure of the numbers of men and women participating in the forums. This included trying to ascertain whether women received the greatest number of ‘abusive’ comments as found in previous research. Without verifying the identities of contributors with regard to gender, the numbers of male and female-gendered pseudonyms cannot be considered representative of the number of men and women who actually contributed to the forums. However, it is possible to speculate that as women have been found to experience exclusions and inequalities regarding access to, and participation in, online debates (Da Silva, 2013b; Iosub et al, 2014), the numbers of male and female-gendered pseudonyms may be more representative than one might think, and suggests that women continue to be marginalised.

Against research carried out by Megarry (2014) who reported ‘abusive’ comments are more prevalent against women, this research found ‘abusive’ comments to be higher against male, rather than female-gendered commenters, in both the *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums. Whilst acknowledging the unverified status of contributors concerning their real identities, present data suggests Dahlberg’s (2001a) concerns regarding exclusivity and inequalities experienced by women online is substantiated, though the level of abuse aimed at male-gendered commenters goes against his claims concerning gender bias regarding ‘abusive’ commenting. Whilst the effects of ethnicity and socio-economic status, regarding

participation in online debates, were not established in this study, they have been found to be a factor in other research (James, 2011; Hargittai, 2008).

The second part of the analysis focused on whether, and to what extent contributors' affect the participation of others within the three news online comment forums. These effects were measured against three criteria 'abuse', 'monopolisation of attention' and 'control of the agenda'. With regard to 'abusive' comments, the structure of the *WHYS* forum is such that it allows a series of responses to the original news article, rather than as a forum for back-and-forth discussions between contributors. The forum is 'managed' in such a way that 'abusive' comments are not published. As such, contributors to the *WHYS* forums are not the recipients of 'abusive' posts. *RightMinds* forums are both pre and post-moderated. Despite this, a similar number of 'abusive' posts were present within the two types of forums. Unlike both the *WHYS* and the *RightMinds* forums, the *Comment is Free* forums are 'reactively' moderated. Despite this, there was not a significant difference between the numbers of 'abusive' comments posted in the *RightMinds* and the *Comment is Free* forums.

Within both the *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums, 'abusive' comments were coded in accordance with flaming intensity. In the *RightMinds* forums, 66% of 'abusive' comments comprised medium intensity flames (Appendix F). Such comments included 'antagonistic' elements such as condescension, patronisation, ad hominem attacks and personal insults in an apparent attempt to cast doubt on the credibility and the character of the other. Within the *Comment is Free* forums, 61% of 'abusive' comments comprised medium intensity flames (Appendix G), which included elements of 'tension' such as patronisation, sarcasm and mockery in an apparent attempt to reduce the credibility of the other whilst promoting the strength of their own arguments. Yet, where Dahlberg (2001a) argues that 'abusive' comments affect the inclusiveness and quality of participation within online debates, commenters in receipt of such posts within both the *RightMinds* and *Comment is*

Free forums were not deterred from participating, and in some cases, the level of ‘abuse’ they received appeared to encourage them to remain in the debate.

With regard to ‘monopolisation of attention’ within the three forums, in order for commenters to be ‘monopolisers’ they must first post numerous comments to the forum and receive a high number of replies (Ainsworth et al, 2005). Due to the ‘managed’ nature of the *WHYS* forums, commenters are unable to do either. In contrast, some commenters within the *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums participate in ‘monopolising’ the attention of others. Within the *RightMinds* forums, only a small group of contributors in 9 out of 25 forums were identified as ‘monopolising’ the attention of others (Appendix R). Thus, Dahlberg’s (2001a) arguments concerning the negative effects that monopolisation has on the inclusion and equality of participation is not substantiated within the *RightMinds* forums. Moreover, whilst 20 forums out of 40 within *Comment is Free* are subjected to a degree of monopolisation (Appendix U), such monopolisation does not appear to affect other contributors regarding participating in debates. Although some contributors may be deterred from participating, the level of monopolisation does not appear to be detrimental to the inclusiveness and equality of the participation of others.

In considering ‘control of the agenda’ contributors must consistently post comments, and receive numerous replies (Himmelboim et al, 2009). As contributors do not interact with the *WHYS* forums, do not post numerous comments, nor do they receive replies they cannot be considered against this criterion. However, within *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* commenters who post ‘abusive’ comments and those who ‘monopolise’ the forums are also found to be those who ‘control the agenda’. Yet, within the *RightMinds* forums this ‘control’ is limited to 9 forums out of 25, indicating that commenters are largely able to participate in debates unhindered by the agendas of other contributors. Within the *Comment is Free* forums the numbers in which ‘control of the agenda’ is identified increases markedly to

twenty out of forty forums. In this instance, the inclusiveness and equality of all participants within the forums may be more likely to be negatively affected, though there is no evidence of such affects within the forums. This is despite those who ‘control the agenda’ largely appearing to do so using ‘monopolisation’ and ‘abusive’ remarks. In contrast to Dahlberg’s (2001a) assertions that ‘control of the agenda’ is a subtle process, within both the *RightMinds* and the *Comment is Free* forums, the style and tone of comments are significant in the extent of ‘control’ that commenters achieve.

Whilst ‘abusive’ posts are in evidence within *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free*, commenters are not deterred from participating in debates going some way to disproving Dahlberg’s (2001) concerns as to its negative effects on inclusiveness and equality. There is limited evidence of ‘monopolisation’ within *RightMinds* forums, though it is more significant within *Comment is Free*. However, other commenters continue to post comments despite the ‘monopolisation’, and no single commenter monopolises debates across all the forums. There is also evidence that that a small group of commenters within *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* are able to ‘control the agenda’ of the forums, though this largely achieved through abusive’ posts and ‘monopolisation’. However, ‘control of the agenda’ is achieved by numerous commenters participating in debates with one another and is likely to be the result of the process of active deliberation rather than an overt attempt by certain individuals to ‘control the agenda’ of the forums.

In Chapter 5, I examined ‘exchange and critique’. The first part of the analysis examined whether, or to what extent, ‘dogmatic assertions’ were present within the three online news comment forums. From this analysis it became apparent that the majority of comments at 68% (Appendix E), posted to the *WHYS* forums were dogmatically asserted. This appears to be due to the limited amount of characters per post dictated by the two most popular means of contributing that of *Twitter* and SMS text messaging. Comments contained

either high or low intensity flaming, though these comments have no effect on others due to contributors being unable to interact within the forums. However, Dahlberg's (2001a) assertions concerning the limited amount of space in online debates being likely to result in the omission of specific 'criticisable validity claims' leading to 'dogmatic assertions' is largely substantiated.

However, commenters within the *RightMinds*, and the *Comment is Free* forums do not experience these restrictions, with no discernible character limit when posting comments. In the *RightMinds* forums 39% of commenters post dogmatic assertions (Appendix F), though only 6% are directed toward other commenters (Appendix L), and in *Comment is Free*, 37% of comments are dogmatically asserted (Appendix G), with 51% addressed to other commenters (Appendix M). As such, whilst commenters participate in 'dogmatic' exchanges of views within the two sets of forums, they do not meet Dahlberg's (2001) 'exchange and critique' criteria which demands reciprocal exchanges of normative rational-critical arguments supported by specific criticisable validity claims.

According to Dahlberg (2001a) for commenters to participate in 'exchange and critique' they must post comments containing 'normative' positions supported by specific 'criticisable validity claims'. These criteria are in evidence across all three forums, yet 'non-normative' viewpoints (not aiming to reach understanding or consensus) supported by specific 'criticisable validity claims' are also in evidence. This suggests Dahlberg's (2001a) demands for 'normative' positions are not fully substantiated, particularly considering that discursive democracy does not only consist of rational argument, storytelling and personal experience are also used (Dunne, 2009).

Within *WHYS* forums, 63 of 199 comments were coded as containing arguments supported by specific criticisable validity claims (Appendix E). Of those 86% contain internally validated, and 14% externally validated criticisable validity claims (Appendix E),

yet commenters cannot participate in reciprocal debates. As such, whilst commenters present arguments supported by specific ‘criticisable validity claims’, the lack of interaction is anathema to the type of ‘rational-critical’ debates that ‘exchange and critique’ requires.

Commenters in both *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* post comments containing ‘normative’ and ‘non-normative’ positions supported by specific ‘criticisable validity claims’. In comparing the two sets of forums, commenters within *Comment is Free* post a slightly higher degree of such comments at 63% (Appendix G) compared to *RightMinds* at 62% (Appendix F). However, the difference is far more marked when considering that 20% of *RightMinds* contributors address their posts to other commenters when including criticisable validity claims in their posts (Appendix L), in comparison to 61% of contributors within the *Comment is Free* forums (Appendix M). This finding suggests that contributors within *Comment is Free* are more open to participating in debates.

Moreover, within the *RightMinds* forums, 61% of comments contain internally validated criticisable validity claims, and 39% externally validated criticisable validity claims (Appendix F). Whilst in the *Comment is Free* forums, less comments contain internally validated criticisable validity claims at 42% and more externally validated criticisable validity claims at 58% (Appendix G). In comparison to Strandberg and Berg’s (2013:140) study on online newspapers’ readers’ comments, in which they found 65% of comments were ‘internally’ validated and 23% ‘externally’ validated (Jensen, 2003), present data indicates that both the *RightMinds* and the *Comment is Free* forums contain a lesser degree of internally validated criticisable validity claims and a greater degree of externally validated criticisable validity claims, than in Strandberg and Berg’s (2013) study.

However, whilst commenters within the *RightMinds* and the *Comment is Free* forums use specific externally and internally validated criticisable validity claims in their posts, Dahlberg (2001a) demands contributors present ‘normative’ positions supported by specific

‘criticisable validity claims’, which excludes contributors who post comments from a ‘non-normative’ position (not from a position that seeks understanding and consensus). Yet these comments are regularly supported by specific criticisable validity claims. Consequently, whilst such claims strengthen arguments and counterarguments within the forums, they are excluded from the Dahlbergian (2001) ‘ideal-type’ of ‘rational-critical’ debate.

Results from the Bakhtinian Analysis

Associations with existing and recurring themes and repertoires within the *RightMinds* and the *Comment is Free* forums, led to their identification in Bakhtinian (1986) terms as links in a chain of speech communication where discussions are associated with the wider social and political contexts outside the remit of the forums. The Bakhtinian analysis of the comments within the *WHYS*, *RightMinds* and the *Comment is Free* forums identified speech genres comprising two elements, (1) the structure of comments based on the content of the utterance, and (2) the style and tone of those comments. Within the *WHYS* forums, the structure of the comments and their content were expressed in one of two ways first, referring to or quoting part of the article to which they are responding or second, stating their views without reference or quotation of the other’s utterance.

Responses from contributors to the *WHYS* forums concerning ‘exchange and critique’ did not satisfy the requirements of any of the four Bakhtinian styles of utterance. Whilst they demonstrated some similarity with the ‘hidden dialogic’ style, they also contained elements of the more adversarial ‘hidden polemic’. Consequently, these comments were coded under both styles. However, this disparity had no effect on the analysis, as did the emotional-volitional aspects of some of the comments as contributors do not respond to the comments of others within the *WHYS* forums.

In the *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums commenters addressed one another in three very similar, standardised ways providing a generic form in which their responses were

articulated. First, using the ‘block quote’ function to quote an entire comment; secondly, referring to, or quoting part of the comment to which they are responding; thirdly, addressing the recipient without directly referring to or quoting their utterance. When addressing other contributors, 153 out of 290 commenters in *RightMinds* employed the ‘hidden polemic’ style of utterance (Appendix L). This ‘double-voiced’ utterance affords the present interlocutor a critical stance from which to quote, or refer to the views of others before taking a ‘dig’ at their views. This style of utterance may explain why contributors participating in ‘abusive’ debates within *RightMinds* were identified as engaging in ‘antagonistic’ medium intensity flaming, as opposed to the lesser ‘tension’ flaming found in the *Comment is Free* forums.

Whilst contributors to *Comment is Free* used both the ‘hidden polemic’ and ‘parodic’ styles of utterance (Appendix M), commenters invariably express their views in more of a ‘tense’ than ‘antagonistic’ style, following a more conversational format in which the debate is laid out through quotations and rebuttals within the course of individual comments. Nonetheless, these styles of utterance are strongly adversarial particularly noticeable with regard the emotional-volitional intonation of comments. Both the *RightMinds* and the *Comment is Free* forums contained similar conventions of critique including condescension, patronisation, ad hominem attacks and personal insults in an apparent attempt to cast doubt on the credibility and the character of the other. As such, contributors to the *WHYS*, *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums do not comply with Dahlberg’s (2001a) requirement for ‘rational-critical’ debate with regard to his online public sphere criteria.

Moreover, with regard to ‘autonomy’, comments imbued with a high degree of emotional-volitional content appeared to provoke reactions from other contributors to a subject not necessarily of their choosing, distracting them from raising and discussing issues of greatest import to them. As such, the threat to the autonomy of online debates may not

only come from State and commercial interests, but also from the interests and influence of other contributors to the forums.

With regard to ‘discursive inclusion and equality’ comments coded as ‘abusive’, ‘monopolising attention’ or ‘controlling the agenda’ within the *RightMinds* and the *Comment is Free* forums all contained strong emotional-volitional characteristics yet many contributors continued participating in debates. However, rather than doing so in the Dahlbergian (2001a) sense of trying to ‘reach understanding’ through the course of their arguments, contributors tended to present and defend their own views without consideration of the views of the other. Rather than putting forward arguments and counterarguments until the force of the ‘better argument’ (Dahlberg, 2000:75) prevailed, contributors appeared to be attacking the views of the other in order to ‘win’ the argument. Whilst these exchanges cannot be deemed to be exclusive or unequal as these commenters continue participating, the argumentative and adversarial nature of these exchanges may deter other contributors from joining debates.

With regard to ‘exchange and critique’ dogmatic assertions are anathema to Dahlberg’s (2001a) online public sphere conception. The numbers of dogmatic assertions are limited within the forums, though they are espoused with a significant amount of emotional-volitional content. Against Dahlberg’s (2001a) demand for ‘normative’ positions, which are premised on ‘rational-critical’ debate and ‘reaching understanding’, the style, content and intonation of the comments are imbued with a significant degree of emotional-volitional content though this does not detract from the strength of the arguments being made. As such, contributors create and maintain deliberations through using specific ‘criticisable validity claims’ without the restrictions of attempting to reach ‘understanding’ or ‘consensus’ within the context of the forums.

Summary of Key Findings

Claims to autonomy are only substantiated within the *Comment is Free* forums and only on a micro level, indicating that ‘autonomy’ from State and commercial influences within online news comment forums may be difficult to achieve. This is highlighted by the extent to which preceding themes and repertoires on topics under discussion are recirculated within the forums. This suggests that online news comment forums, and the discussions held therein, form a heteroglossic connection between preceding speech and future speech, limiting the level of ‘autonomy’ available to contributors through the process of intertextuality, as Bakhtin (1981:337) explains:

The transmission and assessment of the speech of others, the discourse of another, is one of the most widespread and fundamental topics of human speech...The more intensive, differentiated and highly developed the social life of a speaking collective, the greater is the importance of attaching, among other possible subjects of talk, to another’s word, another’s utterance, since another’s word will be the subject of passionate communication, an object of interpretation, discussion, evaluation, rebuttal, support [and] further development.

Consequently, that online comment forums contain many references to preceding themes and repertoires could be attributed to the highly mediated way in which individuals now communicate with many opportunities for ‘conversations within conversations’ to develop. This raises questions as to the effects that mediation is having on the ways in which individuals communicate across multiple channels.

Hodsdon-Champeon’s (2010) study on online discourses about repertoires on racism identifies evaluations and rebuttals which are characterised as forming a particular pattern of insults and abuse that conform to a particular ‘language’ within newsgroups, and suggests that it plays a key role in provoking dialogue by providing a theme and a means of animating discussions. Consequently, the finding that abusive comments do not appear to affect the inclusivity and equality of participants may be due, at least in part, to accepted repertoires concerning the use of ‘abusive’ repertoires in debates. Comments are imbued with a high

degree of emotional-volitional content, particularly in the form of ‘flaming’, which commands a significant presence within the forums, yet, as Hodsdon-Champeon (2010) predicts, rather than deterring contributors from participating, it largely appears to provoke contributors into remaining in debates.

Contributors exchange specific internal and/or external validity claims from ‘normative’ and ‘non-normative’ positions. Commenters make use of the structure of the forums, particularly through the use of double-voiced discourse, which encourages deliberations focused on the views of contributors. Whilst many contributors may not be seeking ‘understanding’ through ‘rational-critical’ debates, their contributions, and the debates that follow from them, can nonetheless be considered valid. Dunne’s (2009:230) research identifies ‘cross-cutting discussions’ within local political online forums. These discussions consist of a “heterogeneous environment [containing] conflict; rational debate; reflexivity; reciprocity; digression; [and] personal experiences”. She concludes that “forums which support this type of discussion are more likely to be active (induce participation) than those that do not” (Dunne, 2009:231).

Therefore, whilst some argue that if the participants in a collective conversation can invoke different but equally valid discourses (each employing different criteria for validation) and, further, have highly different innate structures, the prospects for reaching consensual agreement seem very small (Luhmann, 1996; McCarthy, 1996:1121 in Perez, 2004:83). Though, as outlined by Dunne (2009) this not necessarily be regarded as a negative outcome. If online debates are going to embody an online public sphere, it may be that some of its central tenets, such as the demand for rational-critical debate at the exclusion of all others, may have to be adjusted to accommodate a pluralistic and changing environment.

Future research

This study focused on three of Dahlberg's online public sphere criteria within three mainstream British news online comment forums. Future research, taking into consideration Dahlberg's (2001a) other three criteria, will allow a fuller interpretation of the applicability of his theory to online news comment forums. Future research would also benefit from a cross-national perspective, comparing and contrasting online news comments forums from a diverse array of countries to assess whether, and the extent to which these findings may be replicated more broadly.

This study was restricted to the subject of 'social protest' an emotive subject matter, which may explain the high degree of emotional-volitional and 'abusive' comments identified in this study. Future research on randomly chosen topics may reveal different results regarding these factors. Furthermore, 'flaming' in online news comment forums requires more research, as this study has shown that flaming appears to increase the likelihood of some contributors remaining in debates, in contrast to previous research which has focused on the negative consequences that 'flaming' often entails.

Combining Dahlbergian and Bakhtinian analyses provided new insights into how online news comment forums are organised in terms of the genres of the comments, the types of utterance and intonation used, and to account for pre-existing themes and repertoires contributors draw on during the course of their deliberations. Future theoretical combinations with online public sphere theory, particularly when applied to empirical research, could provide further innovative analysis on the online public sphere conception by taking into account and studying the vast variety of public spheres that different online media, mediums and platforms have created.

Finally, where many studies have used content analysis to examine online public sphere theory in online news comment forums, this study used a mixed methods approach

which yielded different categories of data that, when combined, allowed for a more in-depth analysis of how elements of online public sphere theory are explicated within online news comment forums. Future research using a combined methodology could produce a similarly detailed analysis and findings, providing a greater depth of understanding as to the ways in which contributors participating in online debates both live up to, and contradict, the central tenets of online public sphere theory.

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Appendix A: Numbers of comments posted by gender, replies and comments removed in the *Comment is Free* forums

No. Comments Posted			No. Replies Received			Removed
Male	Female	Non-gendered ¹³⁸	Replies to Male	Replies to Female	Replies to Non-gendered	No. Comments Removed
1660	390	5188	974	281	2702	311

¹³⁸ Within the following Appendices, the term ‘male’ refers to male-gendered pseudonyms, ‘female’ to female-gendered pseudonyms, and ‘non-gendered’ refers to not explicitly gendered pseudonyms that commenters ascribe themselves within the forums.

Appendix B: The BBC's World Have Your Say (WHYS) Forums

Code	Forum	Author	Date	No. Comments
WHYS1	Are the Greeks behaving like a spoilt child?	Chloe Tilley	22.06.11	4
WHYS2	Dorothy Parvez is free	Chloe Tilley	18.05.11	11
WHYS3	DSK latest	Chloe Tilley	01.07.11	13
WHYS4	Is Greece ungovernable?	Chloe Tilley	16.06.11	4
WHYS5	Is the US Pakistan relationship damaged beyond repair?	Chloe Tilley	10.05.11	7
WHYS6	Is there anything we can do about the cost of living?	Sarah Holmes	23.05.11	28
WHYS7	Remember the Arab Spring?	Ben James	19.07.11	7
WHYS8	Should animal rights trump religious rights	Nuala McGovern	29.06.11	22
WHYS9	Should Turkey help Syrians?	Chloe Tilley	10.06.11	12
WHYS10	'Slutwalks': was the Toronto police officer right?	WHYS Team	10.05.11	32
WHYS11	The latest on the Arab Spring	Chloe Tilley	06.05.11	3
WHYS12	What does the women's driving protest mean for Saudi Arabia?	Chloe Tilley	17.06.11	53
WHYS13	Who do you trust to tell you about the Arab Spring?	Chloe Tilley	09.05.11	3
Total				199

Appendix C: The Daily Mail's RightMinds (RM) Forums

Code	Forum	Author	Date	No. Comments
RM1	Afghanistan: The wrong war in the wrong place. Every day we linger there means more lives wasted	Max Hastings	08.03.12	229
RM2	The BBC has a duty to represent the British nation...but is it doing so?	Sonia Poulton	06.04.12	101
RM3	Cameron made the weather at the last EU summit. Now he seems to be in retreat	Nick Wood	30.01.12	17
RM4	Greece Referendum: Corrupt nation holding a gun to the EU's head	Matthew Lynn	02.11.11	279
RM5	Dignified, inspiring - if only Britain had solidarity like this	Suzanne Moore	12.06.11	19
RM6	Disabled: If Public Opinion is Turning against the Disabled, Disability Charities have only themselves to blame	Steve Doughty	06.02.12	157
RM7	Don't be fooled by resurgent Labour. They would soon send us the way of Greece	Simon Heffer	26.05.12	121
RM8	Dying to stay warm? The state must take responsibility	Sonia Poulton	10.11.11	24
RM9	Economic crisis, a falling political class and the spectre of 1930s style extremism across Europe	Stephen Glover	12.04.12	87
RM10	EU budget increase. Just what planet are the people of the European Commission on?	Janice Atkinson-Small	27.04.12	33
RM11	Fight for the right to lie in bed all day	Richard Littlejohn	21.02.12	178
RM12	It's not only rape victims betrayed by the system	Richard Littlejohn	20.05.11	73
RM13	Jobs, welfare and how the BBC went into battle for the socialist workers	Melanie Phillips	26.02.12	235
RM14	MP's stall bid to pension off their gold-plated perk	Andrew Pierce	14.05.12	28
RM15	They are right to protest in dame street, but their focus is wrong	Mary Ellen Synon	17.10.11	32
RM16	Our great institutions are becoming tainted by venality and incompetence. Where are leaders of integrity when we need them?	Max Hastings	18.07.11	108
RM17	Social ties keep rapists in Britain	James Slack	21.09.11	27
RM18	St Paul's should defy the deluded mob and open its doors	Chris Moncrieff	24.10.11	11
RM19	Tabak's secrets and the baffling rules of 'justice'	Suzanne Moore	31.10.11	28

Code	Forum	Author	Date	No. Comments
RM20	Talk about adding insult to injury	Richard Littlejohn	19.08.11	95
RM21	The St Paul's protest is becoming a problem. But it's one of the city's own making	George Pitcher	22.11.11	20
RM22	Wake up America! Justice must be done for Trayvon Martin	Lindsay Johns	22.03.12	33
RM23	Vince scrooge and the hypocrisy of sour faced Lib Dem ministers	Quentin Letts	22.12.11	36
RM24	Wikipedia blackout. It may inconvenience students, but will it concentrate the minds of US politicians?	Steve Doughty	18.01.12	6
RM25	Will maverick Clark send the Tories loco?	Andrew Pierce	05.12.11	10
Total				1987

Appendix D: The Guardian's Comment is Free (CIF) Forums

Code	Forum	Author	Date	No. Comments
CIF1	Algeria's regime - out on a limb that looks set to fall	Brian Whitaker	30.08.11	184
CIF2	Bangladeshis deserve more from politics than strikes and violence	Zafar Sobhan	26.04.12	16
CIF3	Being a Slut, to my mind, was mostly fun – wearing and doing what you liked	Suzanne Moore	14.05.11	486
CIF4	China is deeply flawed. Its dominance is not inevitable	Jonathan Fenby	05.04.12	261
CIF5	Criminalising squatting will merely make the problem worse	Claire Sandbrook	04.07.11	201
CIF6	Does the left have a voice in the Euro crisis?	Nick Cohen	20.11.11	215
CIF7	Egypt haunts Saudi Arabia again	Soumaya Ghannoushi	08.06.11	59
CIF8	Electricians protests shows the real 'big society' in action	Gregor Gall	20.10.11	59
CIF9	ETA may have been defeated militarily, but Basque independence has not	Luke Stobart	28.10.11	44
CIF10	Greece's crisis illustrates the might of the markets	Vincent Bevins	09.05.11	188
CIF11	Heard the one about the rise of the political comedian?	John O'Farrell	13.05.12	71
CIF12	How Arab revolutionary art helped break the spell of political oppression	Julia Rampen and Laurie Tuffrey	05.05.12	60
CIF13	How democratic is Libya's Opposition?	Ranj Alaaldin	25.05.11	284
CIF14	How the fear of being criminalised has forced Muslims into silence	Mehdi Hasan	08.09.11	484
CIF15	Ireland's poisonous blasphemy debate	Padraig Reidy	24.06.11	209
CIF16	It's not just the Russian middle class in revolt - this is a true mas movement	Masha Gessen	04.03.12	110
CIF17	Just a phase? No, the student protests over fees are worthy of respect	Stefan Collini	14.03.12	153
CIF18	Khamenei won't support Assad to the end	Meir Javedanfar	13.08.11	78
CIF19	Morocco's second spring	Issandr El Amrani	17.04.12	25
CIF20	NHS reform: how to kill a bill	Anne Perkins	10.02.12	197
CIF21	Our crisis is not about trust. It's that we no longer agree on basic values	Madeleine Bunting	24.07.11	130
CIF22	Russia is protesting against unfair elections, not against Putin	Ekaterina Zatuliveter	14.12.11	76
CIF23	Scared out of university?	Simon Hughes	30.01.12	187

Code	Forum	Author	Date	No. Comments
CIF24	Spain's general strike is also a day of action for the 99%	Katharine Ainger	27.03.12	116
CIF25	Spanish Protesters vision of change focuses on what people can do together	Oscar Reyes & Hilary Wainwright	29.10.11	54
CIF26	Students will continue to fight to keep education a public service	Michael Chessum	19.09.11	273
CIF27	Syrians should beware of some of the foreign 'friends'	Brian Whitaker	26.02.12	247
CIF28	The British approach to policing protest+B29	Hugh Orde	05.05.11	120
CIF29	The Egyptian Army's Mask has slipped	Austin Mackell	22.06.11	95
CIF30	The Myth of Race	Deborah Ore	05.05.11	411
CIF31	The problem with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood is not Sharia	Sara Korshid	21.01.12	195
CIF32	The Syrian 'opposition' does not have to prove itself	Nadim Shehadi	01.10.11	36
CIF33	The Tottenham riot makes me embarrassed to live here	David Lawrence	08.08.11	358
CIF34	This covert war on Iran is illegal and dangerous	Saeed Kamali Dehghan	11.01.12	400
CIF35	Tuition fees go ahead marks the betrayal of a generation	Michael Chessum	13.07.11	114
CIF36	Turkey is not a free country	Joshua Surtees	01.05.11	250
CIF37	Two hundred people in tents outside St Pauls have created a body more effective than the Church of England	Suzanne Moore	02.11.11	114
CIF38	Vladimir Putin's world is falling apart	Masha Gessen	26.12.11	228
CIF39	Why Ed Miliband should speak the language of Marx	Andrew Martin	25.11.11	403
CIF40	Why Syria's arrested blogger, Razan Gazzawi, is one of my heroes	Jillian C York	05.12.11	47
Total				7238

Appendix E: WHYS Dahlbergian Coding Results

Autonomy	Discursive Inclusion and Equality					Exchange and Critique				
Autonomous Debate	Abusive Comments	Flaming Intensity			Control of Agenda	Monopolisation of Space	Dogmatic Assertions	Crit. Validity Claims	Type of Validity Claim	
		High	Low	Medium					External	Internal
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	136	63	9	54

Appendix F: *RightMinds* Dahlbergian Coding Results

Autonomy	Discursive Inclusion and Equality						Exchange and Critique			
Autonomous Debate	Abusive Comments	Flaming Intensity			Control of Agenda	Monopolisation of Space	Dogmatic Assertions	Crit. Validity Claims	Type of Validity Claim	
		High	Low	Medium					External	Internal
52	943	26	295	622	108	180	759	1185	457	720

Appendix G: Comment is Free Dahlbergian Coding Results

Autonomy	Discursive Inclusion and Equality						Exchange and Critique			
Autonomous Debate	Abusive Comments	Flaming Intensity			Control of Agenda	Monopolisation of Space	Dogmatic Assertions	Crit. Validity Claims	Type of Validity Claim	
		High	Low	Medium					External	Internal
1270	4199	73	1557	2560	2502	3796	2533	4259	1773	2483

Appendix H: WHYS Bakhtinian Coding Results

Double-Voiced Utterances				Addressivity			Expressivity	
Hidden Dialogicality	Hidden Polemic	Stylisation	Parody	Article author	Other Commenter	Wider Community	Antagonistic Comments	Neutral Comments
73	71	8	5	40	0	142	96	57

Referentially Semantic Content				Responsivity		
Article Content Quoted	Article Content Unquoted	Comment Content Quoted	Comment Content Unquoted	Closed Responses	Open Ended Responses	Provoking Response
2	184	0	0	55	63	69

Appendix I: *RightMinds* Bakhtinian Coding Results

Double-voiced Utterances				Addressivity			Expressivity	
Hidden Dialogicality	Hidden Polemic	Stylisation	Parody	Article Author	Other Commenter	Wider Community	Antagonistic Comments	Neutral Comments
79	1199	158	134	466	290	1231	1213	415

Referentially Semantic Content				Responsivity		
Article Content Quoted	Article Content Unquoted	Comment Content Quoted	Comment Content Unquoted	Closed Responses	Open Ended Responses	Provoking Response
46	1366	134	117	513	585	640

Appendix J: Comment is Free Bakhtinian Coding Results

Double-voiced Utterance				Addressivity			Expressivity	
Hidden Dialogicality	Hidden Polemic	Stylisation	Parody	Article Author	Other Commenter	Wider Community	Antagonistic Comments	Neutral Comments
731	3299	380	1712	1049	3965	1886	4545	2202

Referentially Semantic Content				Responsivity		
Article Content Quoted	Article Content Unquoted	Comment Content Quoted	Comment Content Unquoted	Closed Responses	Open Ended	Provoking Response
574	2330	2466	1528	314	2427	3850

Appendix K: Spearman's rho test of correlation between 'abusive' comments and 'antagonistic' expressivity in the *RightMinds* and *Comment is Free* forums

Correlations			Abuse	Antagonistic
Kendall's tau_b	Abuse	Correlation	1.000	.757**
		Coefficient		
		Sig. (2-tailed)		
		N		
	Antagonistic	Correlation	.757**	1.000
		Coefficient		
		Sig. (2-tailed)		
		N		
Spearman's rho	Abuse	Correlation	1.000	.885**
		Coefficient		
		Sig. (2-tailed)		
		N		
	Antagonistic	Correlation	.885**	1.000
		Coefficient		
		Sig. (2-tailed)		
		N		

**, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Appendix L: *RightMinds* Dahlbergian and Bakhtinian Coding Results Combined

	Autonomy	Discursive Inclusion and Equality						Exchange and Critique			
Bakhtinian Criteria	Autonomous Debate	Abusive Comments	Flaming Intensity			Control of Agenda	Monopolisation of Space	Dogmatic Assertions	Crit. Validity Claims	Type of Validity Claim	
			High	Low	Medium					External	Internal
Double-voicedness											
1: Hidden Dialogicality	3	56	1	31	24	5	7	13	49	31	16
2: Hidden Polemic	40	615	15	191	409	70	133	438	757	295	457
3: Stylisation	0	29	2	10	17	3	3	61	94	17	76
4: Parody	9	105	4	23	79	19	20	21	110	59	50
Addressivity											
1: Article author	2	283	7	84	193	8	26	161	298	129	165
2: Other Commenter	48	254	8	51	195	100	102	47	234	115	117
3: Wider Community	2	406	11	160	234	0	52	550	653	213	438
Expressivity											
1: Antagonistic	44	710	21	184	505	88	132	406	788	323	459
2: Neutral	8	104	1	81	22	9	35	163	244	89	152
Ref. Semantic Content											
1: Article Quoted	0	36	2	9	26	0	5	15	31	18	13
2: Article Unquoted	4	576	13	217	345	7	69	571	810	301	502
3: Comment Quoted	17	123	4	22	97	40	40	15	114	58	55
3: Comment Unquoted	31	103	4	22	77	51	54	17	96	46	49
Responsivity											
1: Closed	10	224	4	98	122	22	27	182	317	125	186
2: Open Ended	6	198	3	80	115	15	34	265	314	125	188
3: Provocative	37	444	16	101	327	64	108	167	456	184	270

Appendix M: Comment is Free Dahlbergian and Bakhtinian Coding Results Combined

	Autonomy	Discursive Inclusion and Equality					Exchange and Critique				
Bakhtinian Criteria	Autonomous Debate	Abusive Comments	Flaming Intensity			Control of Agenda	Monopolisation of Space	Dogmatic Assertions	Crit. Validity Claims	Type of Validity Claim	
			High	Low	Medium					External	Internal
Double-voicedness											
1: Hidden Dialogicality	124	357	2	174	179	233	379	234	488	250	236
2: Hidden Polemic	528	2097	38	686	1371	1091	1630	1247	2035	725	1309
3: Stylisation	67	142	0	77	65	143	217	152	225	86	139
4: Parody	495	1524	33	589	898	894	1144	279	1432	702	730
Addressivity											
1: Article author	6	609	0	229	381	39	278	378	653	265	388
2: Other Commenter	1260	3240	67	1228	1932	2428	2906	1299	2604	1091	1509
3: Wider Community	4	351	6	101	248	31	503	841	1001	415	586
Expressivity											
1: Antagonistic	888	3185	69	823	2288	1764	2481	1619	2868	1206	1662
2: Neutral	372	990	3	721	262	703	1131	817	1364	569	792
Ref. Semantic Content											
1: Article Quoted	2	450	0	183	267	19	168	189	376	177	199
2: Article Unquoted	4	495	6	138	355	41	598	1020	1264	492	772
3: Comment Quoted	792	2187	52	790	1341	1526	1813	698	1747	705	1041
3: Comment Unquoted	470	1064	15	445	595	909	1108	612	871	397	472
Responsivity											
1: Closed	31	69	0	37	31	54	122	218	90	37	53
2: Open Ended	297	1130	7	628	493	653	1136	941	1462	661	801
3: Provocative	849	2814	65	843	1902	1636	2216	1220	2591	1045	1543

Appendix N: Gender and Internet Penetration in the *WHYS* forums

Country	Male	Female	Non-gendered	Total	Internet Penetration Level (A. <20%, B. 20-40%, C. 40-60%, D. 60-80%, E. >80%)
Unknown location	28	19	43	90	
Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, India, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe	6	2	9	16	A
Barbados, Egypt, Jamaica, Nigeria, Philippines	3	4	9	17	B
Algeria, Antigua, Italy	1	2	1	4	C
Australia, Czech Republic, Kuwait, Latvia, Spain, USA	7	9	4	20	D
New Zealand, UK	9	0	1	10	E
Total by Gender & Country	54	36	109	157	
'Anonymous' Comments				42	
Total Comments				199	

Appendix O: Number of comments posted by gender, and number of replies received, in the *RightMinds* forums

No. Comments Posted				No. Replies Received			
Male	Female	Non-gendered	Total	Replies to Male	Replies to Female	Replies to Non-gendered	Total Replies
1085	345	559	1987	229	48	130	407

Appendix P: Gender and Internet Penetration in the *RightMinds* forums

Country	Male	Female	Non-gendered	Total	Internet Penetration Level (A <20%, B 20-40%, C 40-60%, D 60-80%, E >80%)
Unknown	43	76	27	146	
Ghana, Indonesia, Uganda	4	0	0	4	A
China, Philippines, South Africa, Thailand	26	1	2	29	B
Corfu, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Russia, Tenerife, Turkey	11	0	8	19	C
Australia, Belgium, France, Gibraltar, Guernsey, Ireland, Jersey, Malaysia, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, USA	76	24	34	132	D
Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden	22	1	5	28	E
UK	903	243	483	1629	
Total	1085	345	557	1987	

Appendix Q: Number of abusive comments posted, and received, according to gender in the *RightMinds* forums

No. Comments Posted				Non-moderated Forums	Moderated Forums	No. Replies Received			
Male	Female	Non-gendered	Total	No. Abusive Comments	No. Abusive Comments	Replies to Male	Replies to Female	Replies to Non-gendered	Total Replies
504	150	289	943	533	410	133	45	56	234

Appendix R: Numbers of single and multiple contributions to the *RightMinds* forums

Forum	Total No. Comments	No. Single Commenters	Average No. Single Comments	No. Multiple Commenters	Total No. Multiple Comments	Average No. Multiple Comments	Replies
RM1	229	199	1.15	13	30	2.31	18
RM2	101	67	1.51	9	33	3.77	22
RM3	17	17	1	0	0	0	0
RM4	279	245	1.14	14	34	2.43	35
RM5	19	19	1	0	0	0	0
RM6	157	83	1.89	20	75	3.75	46
RM7	121	92	1.32	11	29	2.64	20
RM8	24	20	1.2	2	4	2	2
RM9	87	79	1.1	4	8	2	5
RM10	33	33	1	0	0	0	1
RM11	178	167	1.11	7	11	2.71	21
RM12	73	61	1.2	4	12	3	20
RM13	235	190	1.24	20	45	2.25	28
RM14	28	26	1.08	1	2	2	2
RM15	32	30	1.07	1	2	2	7
RM16	108	104	1.04	2	4	2	2
RM17	27	27	1	0	0	0	0
RM18	11	6	1.83	2	5	2.5	1
RM19	28	28	1	0	0	0	5
RM20	95	61	1.56	13	34	2.62	34
RM21	20	8	2.5	3	12	4	7
RM22	33	29	1.14	2	4	2	2
RM23	36	34	1.06	1	2	2	0
RM24	6	4	1.5	1	2	2	3
RM25	10	8	1.25	1	2	2	3
Total	1987	1637	31.89	131	350	49.98	284

Appendix S: Monopolisation of a *RightMinds* (RM2¹³⁹) forum by 3 contributors

Commenter	No. Comments Posted	No. Replies Received	No. Monopolised Comments
John Smith, Birmingham, England	5	7	12
LilyWhite, East	10	3	13
R Coxs, Norfolk	8	1	9
Total No. Comments on Forum			101
Total John Smith, LilyWhite & R Coxs	23	11	34

¹³⁹ ‘The BBC has a Duty to represent the British Nation...but is it doing so?’, Sonia Poulton, 06.04.12

Appendix T: Number of abusive comments posted, and received, according to gender in the *Comment is Free* forums

No. Comments Posted				No. Replies Received			
Male	Female	Non-gendered	Total No. Abusive Posts	Replies to Male	Replies to Female	Replies to Non-gendered	Total No. Abusive Replies
897	323	2979	4199	715	229	2185	3129

Appendix U: Numbers of single and multiple contributions to the *Comment is Free* forums

Forum	Total No. Comments	Comments Removed	No. Single Commenters	No. Multiple Commenters	Average No. Comments per contributor	No. Multiple Comments	Average No. Multiple Comments	No. Replies to Multiple Comments
CIF1	184	7	47	15	2.97	130	8.67	66
CIF2	16	1	7	2	1.78	8	4	6
CIF3	486	51	110	51	3.02	325	6.37	232
CIF4	261	4	63	30	2.81	194	6.47	142
CIF5	201	13	50	28	2.58	138	4.93	108
CIF6	215	4	81	33	1.89	130	3.94	93
CIF7	59	4	27	12	1.51	26	2.17	15
CIF8	59	0	29	13	1.4	30	2.31	13
CIF9	44	1	15	3	2.44	30	9.33	18
CIF10	188	4	74	15	2.11	110	7.33	72
CIF11	71	0	45	9	1.31	26	2.89	12
CIF12	60	3	22	8	2	35	4.38	30
CIF13	284	4	34	33	4.24	246	7.45	188
CIF14	484	61	77	61	3.51	346	5.67	257
CIF15	209	4	79	34	1.85	126	3.71	63
CIF16	110	3	28	14	2.62	79	5.64	53
CIF17	153	0	57	30	1.76	96	3.2	70
CIF18	78	4	21	15	2.17	53	3.53	30
CIF19	25	2	11	5	1.56	12	2.4	4
CIF20	197	4	68	37	1.88	125	3.79	89
CIF21	130	1	60	25	1.53	69	2.76	30
CIF22	76	2	19	17	2.11	55	3.24	33
CIF23	187	7	78	35	1.65	102	2.91	67

Forum	Total No. Comments	Comments Removed	No. Single Commenters	No. Multiple Commenters	Average No. Comments per contributor	No. Multiple Comments	Average No. Multiple Comments	No. Replies to Multiple Comments
CIF24	116	0	50	26	1.53	66	2.54	35
CIF25	54	0	22	11	1.64	32	2.91	19
CIF26	273	5	49	41	3.03	219	5.34	176
CIF27	247	10	49	35	2.94	188	5.37	150
CIF28	120	2	64	19	1.45	54	2.84	33
CIF29	95	3	21	15	2.64	71	4.73	53
CIF30	411	20	101	61	2.49	290	4.75	236
CIF31	195	14	45	38	2.35	136	3.58	104
CIF32	36	0	18	8	1.38	18	5.13	76
CIF33	358	12	127	61	1.9	219	3.6	128
CIF34	400	28	90	68	2.53	282	4.15	231
CIF35	114	3	56	23	1.44	55	2.39	25
CIF36	250	13	56	30	2.91	181	6.03	138
CIF37	114	2	34	17	2.24	78	4.59	57
CIF38	228	4	87	37	1.84	137	3.7	95
CIF39	403	8	113	58	2.36	282	4.86	225
CIF40	47	3	17	8	1.88	27	3.76	18
Total	7238	311	2101	1081	87.25	4826	177.36	3490

Appendix V: Monopolisation by Davgrin, SawaAlZaman, BangorStu, and SidsKitchen, in a single *Comment is Free* (CIF13¹⁴⁰) forum

Comment No.	Commenter	Responding to	Monopolised
31	Davgrin	Article	1
32	Davgrin	Article	1
36	Teacup	Davgrin	1
38	Davgrin	Article	1
39	Finite187	Davgrin	1
40	Davgrin	Finite187	1
48	Davgrin	Finite187	1
50	SawaAlZaman	Ranj	1
52	englishbernie	SawaAlZaman	1
61	Bangorstu	article	1
63	Bangorstu	jaggedgemini	1
64	SawaAlZaman	englishbernie	1
65	SawaAlZaman	Article	1
70	SawaAlZaman	spectreovereurope	1
71	SawaAlZaman	Ranj	1
72	englishbernie	SawaAlZaman	1
74	Bangorstu	hopefulcyclist	1
75	Bangorstu	Talkthetalk	1
76	Davgrin	Bangorstu	2
77	Davgrin	Bangorstu	2
82	hopefulcyclist	Bangorstu	1
84	Bangorstu	Davgrin	2
85	SidsKitchen	Article	1
86	Bangorstu	hopefulcyclist	1
87	Davgrin	Bangorstu	2
90	Davgrin	RobotNick	1
91	SawaAlZaman	englishbernie	1
92	RobotNick	Davgrin	1
94	SawaAlZaman	Berchmans	1
95	SawaAlZaman	j137	1
96	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
97	jaggedgemini	SawaAlZaman	1
98	Davgrin	RobotNick	1
101	SawaAlZaman	jaggedgemini	1
102	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
105	SawaAlZaman	Davgrin	2
106	SawaAlZaman	englishbernie	1
107	Bangorstu	Davgrin	2
108	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
110	Davgrin	Bangorstu	2
111	SawaAlZaman	Davgrin	2
112	Bangorstu	Davgrin	2
113	Davgrin	Bangorstu	2

¹⁴⁰ ‘How democratic is Libya’s Opposition?’ Ranj Alaaldin, *Comment is Free*, 25.05.11

Comment No.	Commenter	Responding to	Monopolised
114	SidsKitchen	Davgrin	2
116	Davgrin	Bangorstu	2
117	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
118	SawaAlZaman	Davgrin	2
119	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	2
121	SawaAlZaman	Davgrin	2
122	Forthestate	Bangorstu	1
124	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
125	bogdog	Bangorstu	1
126	SidsKitchen	Article	1
127	SawaAlZaman	URSULARICHES	1
128	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	2
129	SawaAlZaman	Davgrin	2
130	bogdog	Bangorstu	1
131	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
132	stopbombing	SawaAlZaman	1
134	Davgrin	HHumphrey	1
135	bogdog	SidsKitchen	1
136	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
138	SawaAlZaman	Davgrin	2
139	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
140	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
142	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
143	SawaAlZaman	Davgrin	2
144	Bangorstu	Article	1
146	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
147	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
149	Davgrin	Bangorstu	2
152	Forthestate	Bangorstu	1
153	SidsKitchen	Davgrin	2
154	bogdog	Bangorstu	1
155	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
158	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	2
160	SidsKitchen	Davgrin	2
161	edwardrice	SidsKitchen	1
162	Bangorstu	ForthEstate	1
163	Bangorstu	edwardrice	1
164	Davgrin	Article	1
165	Bangorstu	bogdog	1
166	communismlives	SidsKitchen	1
167	Bangorstu	Davgrin	2
168	Bangorstu	Davgrin	2
170	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	2
171	Bangorstu	communismlives	1
172	communismlives	Davgrin	1
174	Davgrin	Bangorstu	2
175	Davgrin	communismlives	1
177	communismlives	Bangorstu	1
179	Bangorstu	communismlives	1

Comment No.	Commenter	Responding to	Monopolised
180	communismlives	Davgrin	1
182	communismlives	Bangorstu	1
183	edwardrice	Bangorstu	1
184	spectreovereurope	Bangorstu	1
185	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	2
187	edwardrice	Davgrin	1
188	Davgrin	nutmeghusk	1
189	Davgrin	edwardrice	1
192	jaggedgemini	Bangorstu	1
194	edwardrice	Davgrin	1
195	lundiel	Bangorstu	1
196	Davgrin	edwardrice	1
199	edwardrice	Davgrin	1
200	SawaAlZaman	Davgrin	2
204	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
207	Davgrin	Ramysaaed	1
209	Ramysaaed	Davgrin	1
210	SawaAlZaman	Davgrin	2
213	Davgrin	Ramysaaed	1
214	SawaAlZaman	Davgrin	2
215	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
216	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
218	SawaAlZaman	Davgrin	2
219	SawaAlZaman	removed	1
220	SidsKitchen	Raniat	1
221	spectreovereurope	SawaAlZaman	1
222	EACLucifer	Davgrin	1
224	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
225	Davgrin	EACLucifer	1
227	Davgrin	EACLucifer	1
229	SidsKitchen	Davgrin	2
230	ahji	SawaAlZaman	1
231	EACLucifer	Davgrin	1
232	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	2
233	SidsKitchen	Davgrin	2
234	Davgrin	EACLucifer	1
236	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	2
237	Davgrin	EACLucifer	1
239	SidsKitchen	Davgrin	2
240	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	1
242	SidsKitchen	Davgrin	2
243	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	2
244	SidsKitchen	Davgrin	2
245	SawaAlZaman	removed	1
246	SidsKitchen	Davgrin	2
247	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	2
248	EACLucifer	Davgrin	1
249	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	2
250	SawaAlZaman	spectreovereurope	1

Comment No.	Commenter	Responding to	Monopolised
251	Davgrin	EACLucifer	1
252	SawaAlZaman	removed	1
253	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
254	SawaAlZaman	commenters	1
255	SawaAlZaman	Davgrin	2
256	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
257	SawaAlZaman	Davgrin	2
260	SawaAlZaman	Article	1
261	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
262	SawaAlZaman	Article	1
263	Davgrin	Article	1
264	Davgrin	Article	1
265	SawaAlZaman	Article	1
266	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
267	SawaAlZaman	commenters	1
268	Davgrin	SawaAlZaman	2
269	Littleriver	Davgrin	1
270	Davgrin	littleriver	1
271	SawaAlZaman	Article	1
273	SidsKitchen	Davgrin	2
274	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	2
275	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	2
276	Davgrin	Article	1
277	SidsKitchen	Davgrin	2
278	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	2
279	SidsKitchen	Davgrin	2
280	Davgrin	SidsKitchen	2
281	SawaAlZaman	Article	1
282	SidsKitchen	Davgrin	2
284	LittleRichardjohn	SawaAlZaman	1
Total Davgrin, SawaAlZaman, BangerStu and Sidskitchen			246
Davgrin	69	44	113
SawaAlZaman	35	29	64
Total Davgrin & SawaAlZaman	104	73	177

Appendix W: WHYS Dahlbergian and Bakhtinian Results Combined

	Autonomy	Discursive Inclusion and Equality						Exchange and Critique			
Bakhtinian Criteria	Autonomous Debate	Abusive Comments	Flaming Intensity			Control of Agenda	Monopolisation of Space	Dogmatic Assertions	Crit. Validity Claims	Type of Validity Claim	
			High	Low	Medium					External	Internal
Double-voicedness											
1: Hidden Dialogicality	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	44	29	2	27
2: Hidden Polemic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	48	24	3	21
3: Stylisation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	6	3	3
4: Parody	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	1	2
Addressivity											
1: Article author	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	29	11	1	10
2: Other Commenter	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
3: Wider Community	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	107	52	8	44
Expressivity											
1: Antagonistic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	62	34	6	28
2: Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	38	20	2	18
Ref. Semantic Content											
1: Article Quoted	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
2: Article Unquoted	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	121	61	9	52
3: Comment Quoted	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
3: Comment Unquoted	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Responsivity											
1: Closed	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	41	14	4	10
2: Open Ended	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	40	24	3	21
3: Provocative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	43	26	2	24